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OR,

## The Fresh of 'Frisco's Rustle at Painted City.

The Romance of a Bu'sted Camp.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,

AUTHOR OF "JOE PHENIX, THE POLICE SPY,"  
"THE BAT OF THE BATTERY," "OVERLAND  
KIT," "THE FRESH OF 'FRISCO," ETC.

### CHAPTER I.

#### THE SLEEPER.

THE old trail from the ancient town of Albuquerque, leading westward toward the calm waters of the great Pacific Ocean, that gallant Captain Sitgreaves followed in '51, when he led an exploring expedition seeking a new road to the El Dorado which the gold-seekers had discovered in the land of the setting sun.

The place, a secluded nook in the foot-hills of the Sierra Madre—mother mountains—where the road to the old Mexican town of Agua Fria bends southward from the Overland Trail.

"HEY, SPORT, WAKE UP!" CRIED THE MYSTERIOUS VOICE. "THAR'S WORK FOR YOU!"



Just beyond the junction of the two roads there is a heavy growth of evergreens; the silver-leaved mountain pines, the spiny red cedar, the upright and trailing junipers struggle with each other amid the rocks for existence.

A dozen paces from the trail, crouched like a wild deer amid the thicket, in a cozy nook, a bower fit for a silvan queen, was a human, fast and sound in slumber's chain, on this particular morning of which we write, when the sun came up from behind the far eastern hills and began to fling his shining lances of light over the undulating earth.

It is of the territory of New Mexico that we speak, and our tale is of a period prior to the time when the shrill scream of the Iron Horse scared the jack rabbit from his lair, and sent the fleet-footed antelope bounding to the coverts of the wooded mountain ranges.

The sleeper was a man, and he slept as sleeps the mortal when he sinks exhausted after a long day's toil.

He lay extended at full length upon his right side, and above him the spreading branches of a lordly white pine afforded a friendly shelter.

The sleeper had been covered by a blanket, one of the fiery red-hued ones, so common on the borders of civilization, the outer garment so dear to the heart of the feather-garnished chieftain, the red king of prairie wilderness and sterile mountain range.

But this blanket was one that the most worthless red sot who ever begged a drink of "fire-water" in a frontier saloon would have cast aside in disdain, for it was so full of holes that it was a wonder it held together.

The man, sleeping so soundly, had, with an unconscious movement of his arm, thrown the covering to one side, so that a full view of him could be obtained.

In figure he was about the medium size, but most superbly built.

His muscular development would have excited the envy of a professional champion of the ring, a "world-beater," scientific and experienced, able to "size up" his antagonists with wonderful accuracy.

Such a man would not have dared the sleeper into the regulation twenty-four foot ring, with the expectation of winning an easy victory, and yet so symmetrical was his form that even an athletic trainer, used to judging men, would not have set him down as being heavy enough for a "middle-weight," yet he would pull down the scale to a hundred and seventy pounds, which would allow of his entering the "heavy-weight" division.

The features of the sleeper were regular and clearly cut; the massive chin and firm-set mouth denoted strength of will and dauntless courage; the broad, high forehead intelligence and ability, while the absence of deep lines of care showed that the man was one of those happy natures who are disposed to take the world as it comes, and do not waste time in idle regrets and repinings.

He was a handsome fellow, too, with his oval face, fringed by yellow locks, which curled in little crispy ringlets all over his head, and the peculiar air which plainly betrayed that he was a man of birth and breeding.

No one would have imagined that he amounted to anything though, if they had judged the man by the clothes he wore, for no old tramp, or bummer, could be much worse off as far as costume was concerned.

His flannel shirt had once been red, but now it was all sorts of colors, for it was not only faded, but patched in a dozen places, and the one who had done the mending had evidently taken the first piece of cloth which came handy.

The coarse, woolen pantaloons were fully as bad as the shirt, and a worse pair of boots than those which the sleeper wore would be hard to find.

Even the hat, a high-crowned, broad-brimmed slouch, was so old that it had completely lost its original shape, and a more ridiculous specimen of head-gear could hardly be produced.

Contrary to the usual custom of travelers who traverse the trails of the Wild West, the man was not armed; a stout, club-like walking-stick being his only weapon.

The sun, rising over the eastern hills, threw one of his lances of light under the spreading branches of the pine, full upon the face of the sleeper, as though to warn him to rise.

The sunbeams disturbed him; he raised his hand toward his head as though to shield his eyes from the light, and then awoke.

He was not one of those men who yawn, rub their eyes, and take several minutes to recover from the effects of their slumbers, but awoke to consciousness upon the instant.

Rising to a sitting position, he looked around him, and if any of the readers of the tales wherein the doings of the marvelous sharp known as the Fresh of Frisco are described had been in the neighborhood, so that they could have had a view of the stranger's face, they would have recognized the man in an instant, for he was no other than Jackson Blake, the hero of a hundred wonderful adventures.

"Well, I have slept in many a softer bed than this, and a few that were harder," he remarked.

"But for all that, I must admit that I feel pretty well rested, and I have no doubt I can make good time when I strike the trail again."

Then his eyes happened to fall upon the dilapidated boots which he wore, and he shook his head in a doubtful way.

"When I talked about making good time, I forgot all about these boots!" he exclaimed.

"Did mortal man ever see a worse pair?"

"They were pretty bad when I started from Albuquerque, but now such a division has arisen between the soles and the uppers that I think it would be safe to bet that ten miles more will result in a complete split between the two."

"I have often heard of a man walking on his uppers, but I never really realized just how it felt to be in that peculiar position until now."

"Needs must, though, when the devil drives!" the sharp continued as he rose to his feet.

"I have got to get to Painted City, and the only horse I have is Shanks' mare, so I must hoof it as well as I can."

He picked up the rough staff, and holding it at arm's length, surveyed it for a moment.

"That is a nice-looking weapon for a first-class sport to travel with!" the Fresh observed, in a tone of deep disgust.

"The idea that a man like myself, who has always been used to traveling well-heeled, should be reduced to the necessity of carrying around a club like a South Sea Islander."

"I have run into some bad streaks of luck in my time, but this last heat beats the deck."

"Well, it is a long lane that has no turning, and luck certainly cannot run counter much longer. It must turn soon, and then I will be in clover again."

Having come to this conclusion, the sport left the shelter of the pines and struck into the trail.

He proceeded at a brisk walk, but was soon forced to moderate his pace, for the old boots were in such a wretched condition that it was plain he would speedily walk out of them unless he proceeded with extreme carefulness.

"This is the roughest deal I ever struck!" he exclaimed, ruefully. "And how I am ever going to get to Painted City is a question!"

"I am beginning to get hungry too," he continued. "All I had all day yesterday was some crackers and cheese, and though that combination does first-rate for a lunch once in a while, yet when it comes to making a steady diet of it, three times a day, the sameness is apt to wear on a man."

"And then, too, it is really expecting too much to think that a healthy, able-bodied sharp like myself would be satisfied to live on two-bits' worth of crackers and cheese per day."

"Oh, no, such a ration as that is altogether out of the question. I am in pretty good condition now; if I were going to train for an athletic contest I should not have to get rid of so many pounds of superfluous flesh, and as I haven't any fat to spare I am not obliged to try any reduction business. But I will have to grin and bear it, though, for I will not be able to get anything to eat until I reach the mining-camp, and that is a good six hours off, for it must be about twenty miles away, and with these miserable boots I cannot make good time, no matter how great a hurry I am in."

Then, for a few hundred yards, the sport walked on in silence.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, abruptly, "I cannot even come the old dodge of buckling my belt a notch or two tighter so as to suppress the pangs of hunger, for I haven't got a belt, and if I attempted to use any force on these miserable old trousers the odds are big that they would tear in a dozen places."

"As I said before, I must grin and bear it until Painted City is reached, and then I must depend upon my colossal cheek for my grub, for neither gold or silver have I."

"Hello! what's that?"

And as the Fresh uttered the exclamation he stopped and sniffed the air.

A savory smell was borne to his nostrils on the wings of the wind.

"Aha! corn in Egypt!" the sharp cried. "There isn't any mistake about it! Nectar and ambrosia—salt pork frying in a pan!"

## CHAPTER II.

### THE PROSPECTORS.

THE sport was quite certain that he was not wrong in his conjecture, for he could not only smell the odor which arose from the meat exposed to the action of the fire but he could hear it sizzling in the pan.

"Some party getting their morning meal, and as the average westerner is nothing if not hospitable the odds are about a thousand to one that I am in for a good breakfast!" Blake declared, highly delighted at the prospect of appeasing his hunger.

On he went.

Fifty paces and the trail bent abruptly to the right; when Blake reached the turn he saw a sight which surprised him.

A mountain streamlet, clear as crystal, but small in size, came down from the foot-hills, ran alongside of the road for a few yards and then branched off through a little valley dotted over with clumps of trees.

Cropping the herbage was one of the diminutive donkeys, locally known as a burro.

The animal was tethered near a clump of dwarf oaks; in the shelter of the trees was a small tent, and in front of it a fire burned; stooping over the blaze was a tall, handsome, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl attending to the cooking of some salt pork which was hissing merrily in the frying-pan.

The girl was young, not yet out of her teens, yet fully developed, well-formed and muscular.

She was robed in a plain, dark woolen dress, cut rather short, and a soft felt hat perched upon the back of her head.

She was a typical westerner, a regular pioneer's daughter, and if there was a doubt of this fact the revolver belted to her waist, in plain sight, would have been convincing proof.

The sport, surprised by the unexpected sight, came to a halt, but the quick ears of the burro had heard the strange footsteps and quickly his bray gave warning to the girl that something was amiss.

As she straightened up and cast her eyes around, her hand sought the handle of her revolver.

A true daughter of the West she was always on the watch for danger.

As soon as she caught sight of the shabbily-dressed stranger, with the miserable old hat flopping about his ears, and ragged blanket, which he had folded and flung over his left shoulder in the Mexican fashion, her alarm was at once excited and she whipped out her revolver, raised the hammer in a twinkling, and leveled it at the intruder.

"Stay where you are!" she cried, in clear, resolute tones. "Don't attempt to advance a step or I will send a bullet through you!"

And that this was no idle threat the sport felt well-assured.

He was only some sixty feet away—within easy range, and if the girl was anything of a shot, and from the way she handled the weapon Blake had an idea that she was, the chances were good that she could not fail to hit him.

"Hold on! don't be in a hurry to try any pistol practice on me if you please," Blake exclaimed, removing his hat and making an extremely polite bow.

The sport had the voice of an orator, flexible and pleasant, and the tones, so different from what the girl expected to hear, caused a look of surprise to appear on her face.

The sport saw immediately that he had made an impression and he was quick to improve it.

"I am aware that my appearance is not one calculated to make people take a shine to me," he continued. "But you must bear in mind the old adage that clothes do not make the man, and I might quote the ancient saw that many an honest heart beats beneath a ragged coat, but that saying is somewhat trite and out of date, and then too you might get back at me in a way I should despise by saying that I did not wear any coat."

A smile appeared on the girl's face, plain proof that her alarm had vanished.

"You will perceive upon inspection that I am not armed—this stick can hardly be called a weapon, you know," the Fresh observed.

"Well, I don't know about that," the girl replied, shaking her head and assuming a grave air, as though she had serious doubts about the matter.

"It is not a knife or a pistol, but if you get within striking distance of any one, I fancy you would be able to damage them considerably."

"Oh, yes, that is true enough, but I am perfectly harmless, I assure you, for all that," Blake declared.

"There isn't any danger of my making an assault—except upon something to eat," he continued, and he cast a longing glance at the frying-pan as he spoke. "But I will admit that if I got a good chance I think I would be able to do considerable damage to that salt pork."

Again the girl smiled.

"Are you hungry?"

"Hungry!" the sport exclaimed with a grimace. "Oh, no, that does not express it—I am about half starved!"

"Is it possible?"

"It is; all I have had to eat for the last twenty-four hours was two bits' worth of crackers and cheese, and if you have ever had any dealings with the tradesmen in this region you understand that a single coin of that value does not purchase much fodder!"

"I should not think it would."

"I am on my way from Albuquerque to the mining-camp in the foot-hills of the Sierra Madre called Painted City," the sport explained.

"Yes, I know all about Painted City," the girl remarked. "I live there."

"Oh, do you?"

The girl nodded.

"Then I am glad that I met you, for you will be able to tell me something about the town."

"Oh, yes, I can do that easily enough; I am one of the old inhabitants, having lived in the camp for over six months."

"You must have arrived there soon after it started."

"I did. I went there with my brother. We were living in Albuquerque when the first



strikes were made in the neighborhood, and he got the idea into his head that he could make a fortune in the new camp, so we joined a party which was being made up and located in Painted City."

"That is an odd name for a settlement," Blake observed, reflectively.

"It is so called on account of being at the foot of a great cliff, upon whose side strange, incomprehensible figures are inscribed."

"Ah, yes, I understand; one of the painted rocks, as the early explorers called the strange objects, and the figures are supposed to be the work of the mysterious vanished race who occupied this region before the days of the Zuni tribe; probably the same people who are now called the Mound-builders by the historians."

The girl looked surprised at this display of knowledge, for she had never heard any common miner talk in this way.

"Well, I do not know much about such things. I am not much of a reader," she admitted.

"I hope that your brother's anticipations were realized in regard to a fortune," the sport remarked.

The girl shook her head.

"Indeed, they were not," she replied. "He gave up a good position in Albuquerque to go into mining, and, although he has done fairly well, yet I am sure he would have been much better off if he had never seen the camp."

"Well, as a rule, that is the experience of every man who gives up a certainty to go into mining," the sport remarked, with the air of a man who had "been there."

"Gold-seeking is a lottery, and where one man succeeds a hundred fail."

"Yes, I don't think there is any doubt about that," the girl assented.

"Still it was the talk at Albuquerque that this new camp was enjoying a boom, and no man would make a mistake in going there."

"It is only fairly prosperous," she replied. "Very few of the miners are making more than fair wages. In fact, I do not believe there are ten men in the camp who could not make just as much, if not more wages, in Albuquerque, if they would only work as hard there as they are obliged to work in the Painted City region."

"That is true of the majority of mining-camps, but I was led to expect that Painted City was an exception to the rule."

"It isn't," the girl replied. "My brother would have done better if he had not come, yet he has done as well as most of the miners, and he has lately become so dissatisfied with his gains that he got this burro and has gone into prospecting at a distance from Painted City in hopes to make a strike."

"Well, I trust he will be successful, but this region is not generally regarded as being a likely one. It is not of my own knowledge that I speak for I am a stranger in this part of New Mexico, but I know the opinion of old miners about this ground."

During this conversation the sharp had made his way to the fire and taken a seat upon a bowlder near it.

"You are not a miner then?" the girl asked, surveying the man with a glance which plainly revealed that she was curious in regard to him.

"No, I am of the vulture, not the bee tribe as a red-skin would say," the sport replied with perfect frankness.

"I am not a worker but a man who lives upon the toilers," he explained.

"You will perceive that I am going to be perfectly honest with you about this matter," he continued. "I am a sport—and I am not going to deny it, and I am going to Painted City with the idea of getting my living out of the men who dwell in that camp."

"You are a gambler?" she asked, regarding the other with a distrustful look.

"Yes, that is my business."

"But I had an idea that all gamblers were well dressed," the girl remarked. "I know that all I have ever known were always more careful in regard to their personal appearance than the miners."

"That is correct; the sports who follow gambling for a living usually pride themselves upon dressing well and appearing like gentlemen. In fact there isn't one sport out of a thousand who does not live up to the rule, and I can assure you, miss, that never before during my career as a sharp did any one ever see me when I did not look like a gentleman, but I can speedily explain how I came to be in this unfortunate condition."

#### CHAPTER III.

##### BLAKE'S STORY.

"I AM really curious to learn," the girl remarked. "For I must say that you do not talk like a man who could be comfortable in such wretched clothes as you now wear."

"Well, I am not, and that is a sure enough fact," the sport replied.

"The story is a short one and soon told. A couple days ago I came to Albuquerque. I had considerable money in my possession, and wore as good a suit of clothes as any man would care to own."

"I was on my way to Painted City, for I heard that a big strike had been made in that locality, and as I am partial to 'fresh fields and pastures new,' I thought I would try my luck in the booming town."

"Where the prey is there come the vultures, you know."

"Yes, I understand," and a shade appeared on the girl's face as she spoke, a fact which surprised Blake.

"It was my intention to only remain in Albuquerque for a day or so, expecting to leave by the first coach for Painted City. According to the stories I had heard about the boom which the new camp was enjoying I thought there would be two or three coaches a week, and I was rather surprised when I discovered that there was only one."

"That is all," the girl observed. "And business has been running so light too for the last month that the proprietor is talking of only running a coach every other week."

"Well, well, that is a bad sign!" the sharp declared. "If the camp was doing well—booming right along, according to the accounts, the stage line ought to have increased the number of trips instead of decreasing them."

"Yes, that is true, of course, but the town is not even holding its own instead of gaining."

"That is a bad outlook for me, but to return to my story. Finding that I had four days to stay in Albuquerque I set about passing the time away as pleasant as possible."

"Of course for a man in my line of business it was not difficult to find amusement, for Albuquerque is as well-provided with gaming-houses as any town in proportion to its size, I ever struck, and the gentlemen who run them are a pretty decent set of fellows, so for three days I enjoyed myself very well, but on the fourth day—that was yesterday—I ran across one of the oddest geniuses that I ever encountered, and this man succeeded in cleaning me out in the most scientific manner possible, and I hope you will not think I am boasting when I declare that in all my experience as a sport I never was so badly defeated before."

"Oh, of course, I shall take your word for it," the girl said in a simple way.

"If the man had been one of the ordinary run of sharps the chances are a hundred to one that I would not have been possessed by the perfectly fiendish desire to buck against the fellow to the bitter end, which I experienced when I discovered that luck was against me."

"I don't suppose that you are much acquainted with gamblers and their ways," the sport added.

"Oh, no, all I know about them is that the few I have met seem to be quite nice men, and if I had not been told that they were gamblers I should never have suspected it. I am from the East, you see," she explained. "And in the East men who make their living by card-playing are not held in the same estimation that they are out here."

"I am from the East myself, originally," Blake remarked. "And therefore well aware of the difference of opinion which exists in regard to gamblers in the two sections of country."

"In the East the gambler is a man to be avoided as an unclean thing; here, if he behaves himself, few people are straight-laced enough to throw his profession in his teeth."

"But to return to my mutton: not many gamblers are there who are not the slaves of superstition, more or less. I think I am tolerably strong-minded, but when it comes to gambling I have my weaknesses, and one of them is to quit playing when I find the tide of fortune is setting steadily against me."

"I will make a desperate struggle for a while but when I see that the current is running strongly in one direction, then I usually draw out, and seldom do I wait until I am entirely down to the bed-rock."

"Yes, I should think that would be wise," the girl observed, deeply interested in the recital.

"But on this occasion my opponent seemed to exercise a strange influence over me, and the more anxious I became to keep on playing."

"Ah, but isn't that always the way?" the girl asked. "Of course I don't know much about such things, as in all my life I have never come in contact with but one person who was addicted to gaming, and the more he loses the more anxious he seems to be to play, his argument being that luck will be sure to change some time, and then he will be able to win back all he has lost with a great deal more in the bargain."

The tone of the girl was so anxious, and she betrayed so much feeling about the matter that Blake, being a keen observer and quick to jump to a conclusion, got the suspicion that the gamester to whom she referred was her brother.

But he was careful not to allow the girl to perceive this.

"That is the way the pigeon who has been plucked usually regards the matter, and if it was not so the regular card-sharps would have a hard time to get along," Blake remarked.

"He believes that luck runs in waves and when he is unfortunate enough to encounter a bad run of luck he draws out to give time for it to pass away."

"That has always been my custom until I en-

countered this odd genius in Albuquerque. By all odds he was the most comical fellow I ever met."

"He was short, fat and a regular bummer in his appearance, with a face like a full moon, and a flow of language really wonderful. You can form some idea of the odd appearance the fellow presented dressed in these clothes."

"And did the wretched rags belong to him?"

"All of them, from the hat to the boots," the sharp replied, with a melancholy shake of the head.

"I ran across the fellow about nine o'clock at night. I had cleaned out all the men I had encountered, and, like a raging lion, was seeking for more prey."

"This bummer, Joe Bowers he calls himself, the old original Joe Bowers, challenged me to play. I caught at the idea, for I had no notion that he had any wealth in his clothing, but when I suggested as much to him he produced a buckskin bag, well filled with money, as proof that he was well able to back his game."

"Then the idea came to me that it would be a fine joke to show this fellow that he did not know quite so much about cards as he thought he did, so we set to work."

"Well, to make a long story short, I lost right from the beginning. The man was a good player, knew the value of cards, and how to play them, about as well as I did; but if luck had not run strongly in his favor he could not have beaten me, for he was a slow and cautious player, while I was a brilliant and dashing, and one of the kind called a plunger; he did not improve advantages which I would have seized upon; but such a dire run of bad luck as I experienced mortal man never saw."

"I lost my money, my jewelry, my weapons, and at last, in utter desperation, I staked even the clothes upon my back, and lost them, too."

"Then the fat fellow arrayed himself in my neat black suit—it was as much as he could do to get into it, for it fitted him like his skin—and graciously presented me with his old clothes."

"I wouldn't have taken them!" exclaimed the girl, indignantly.

"Well, I wouldn't, only I couldn't help myself," the sharp replied, with a grimace.

"And then, too, it was something like a man putting on sackcloth and ashes, as they used to do in the old time when repentance for sins was in order."

"Yes, I can understand how you felt," the girl said, slowly.

"Now, I am not a drinking man," the sharp explained. "A man in my line of business cannot afford to allow his brains to become muddled by liquor, but on this occasion, after this woeful defeat, I accepted the invitation of the victor to drown my sorrows in the flowing bowl, as he expressed it, and before we parted—it was after midnight—I was more under the influence of liquor than I ever was before in my life."

"I went round to the corral at the back of the hotel where the great game had taken place, and took a nap in the hay until the morning came, and then I started to walk to Painted City."

"Just as I got to the edge of the town, I began to speculate as to how I was going to live on the road, and happening to put my hand in my pocket, discovered a quarter. This I invested in crackers and cheese."

"It was my intention to make the eatables last me for two days, but my appetite was greater than I expected, and I barely had enough for one day, let alone two."

"You are quite welcome to share our breakfast," the girl remarked.

"It isn't anything extra, you know," she continued. "Some salt pork and hard-tack, as my brother always calls it, and a cup of coffee."

"Hunger is a sauce which makes the coarsest fare palatable, and if you can spare the food, you may be sure that I will do ample justice to it," Blake replied.

"Oh, yes, we have plenty!" the girl declared. "This is our last day out anyway, for this afternoon we will return to Painted City."

"Have you been successful?"

The girl shook her head.

"I don't know as I ought to ask that question, though, for if you had made a strike, you would naturally want to keep it quiet."

"We have not had a bit of luck!" she replied, with a sigh. "And I don't believe we ever will either in this country—but here comes my brother!"

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE BALDFACE BRONCHO.

THE sport cast his eyes in the direction in which the girl was gazing and saw a stoutly-built young man of two and twenty, or thereabouts, approaching.

He was a good-looking fellow but there was weakness perceptible in his face, and a good judge of men would have speedily set him down for a man who was full of the milk of human kindness, but woefully lacking in resolution and enterprise.

The young man looked surprised when he beheld his sister in company with the bummer-



like stranger and directed a questioning glance at her as he came up to the two.

"This gentleman is on his way to Painted City," she said in answer to the look. "And as he had not had any breakfast I took the liberty of inviting him to take some with us."

"Oh, that is all right, of course," the young man observed.

But there was a look on his face which seemed to indicate that he was surprised at her action.

The sharp understood that the young man did not admire his appearance and so he hastened to explain.

"I am playing in hard luck, as the saying is, just at present," he remarked.

"At Albuquerque I had the ill-luck to get into a little game and things went so decidedly wrong that I not only lost all my money, but everything else of value that I possessed, even including my clothes, and when my man stripped me clean he was generous enough to make me a present of his old suit."

"Ah, yes, I understand," the young man replied, his interest immediately excited.

"I do a little playing myself sometimes, and I know what it is to get into a game and become so excited over it as to be willing to risk everything a man owns," he continued, and as he spoke there appeared in his eyes the peculiar light which betrays the desperate gamester.

"But it is awful bad policy, you know, to get in so deeply," the sharp remarked with a warning shake of the head. "Just see how it has worked in my case! I noticed when you came up that you looked in a very doubtful way at me, and I don't wonder at it, for in this beastly rig it would take a man of wonderful discernment to see that I wasn't a drunken bum."

"Well, I must admit that at the first glance I thought you were a pretty tough customer," the young man observed.

"You will find that I am like a singed cat—not half so bad as I look," the sport declared. "I claim to be a gentleman, although I do make a living by card-playing."

"Oh, that isn't anything out in this region. Here everything goes!" the other declared.

"My name, by the way, is Blake, Jackson Blake."

"I am glad to know you, Mr. Blake, although you are a little under the weather at present. My name is Martin Anderson, and this is my sister, Katherine."

The sport doffed his miserable old hat and made a profound bow to the girl.

"I am delighted at being afforded the opportunity of making your acquaintance," he affirmed. "The more so because you have got something to eat, and I must frankly acknowledge that I am about half-starved."

"You are quite welcome to join us, so let us fall to as soon as we can, for I have a pretty good appetite myself."

The girl hastened to serve the repast, and all of them did ample justice to it.

After their hunger was satisfied, the conversation was resumed, the girl inquiring of her brother as to his success.

"Nothing at all—not a show of color," Anderson replied. "I am clean discouraged."

"You must not allow yourself to feel that way," Blake remarked. "You must follow that good old motto: 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again!'"

"Yes, that is just what I say," the girl declared. "A man ought not to be discouraged because he does not meet with success right in the beginning; patience and perseverance will surely win in the long run."

"Well, I don't feel so sure about that," the young man replied in a gloomy way.

"This has been an up-hill fight for a long time now and I am beginning to get tired."

"This is an extremely uncertain world you know," the sport observed, with the air of a philosopher. "And the wheel of fortune sometimes turns around with such surprising swiftness that the beggar of to-day becomes the millionaire of to-morrow."

"It is not possible for mortal to predict what the future will be."

"Now take my own case. Can you imagine a man in much harder luck than a gentleman about my size? Here I am literally in rags, a good day's walk between me and my objective point, and my boots in such a dreadful condition that it would be a good speculation for any man to bet ten to one that soles and uppers will part company before I get half-way to Painted City, and this is the toughest kind of a country for a man to walk barefoot."

"Then, too, when I arrive at this mining-camp, what chance do I stand? I have not a cent in my pocket, and I do not know a soul in the place."

"I flatter myself that I am tolerably expert at all sorts of games, but if I was the most skillful man that ever rattled a dice-box or dealt a card what chance do I stand to make a stake when I have not a single coin to back my game?"

"Not much, that is a fact!" the young man exclaimed, while the girl looked sympathetic.

"The only hope for me is that in this camp I will be lucky enough to strike some man who is anxious to risk his money yet has not confi-

dence enough in his own abilities as a player to play himself, and has sufficient faith in me to trust his money in my hands."

Anderson shook his head in a doubtful way.

"You do not think there is much chance of my striking an angel of that kind?" Blake asked.

"No, to be frank with you, I do not," the young man answered.

"You are right, sir, for a thousand dollars!" the sharp declared.

"In the first place I am a stranger in the camp, and therefore no one knows whether I play a good game or a bad one; in the second, my appearance is so dreadfully against me that not one man out of a hundred would be willing to lend me a two-bit piece, much less trust me with twenty-five or fifty dollars to risk in a game of chance."

"You have figured it up pretty correctly, I think," Anderson observed. "And then, too, there are not many men who would care to have anybody else operate on their money," he continued. "If a man wants to gamble, he generally likes to do the playing himself."

"Yes, that is true enough," Blake admitted. "So, you see, my case seems to be a pretty desperate one, and yet I do not despair in the least."

"All that I am worried about is the getting to Painted City," he added. "If I can manage to reach the town, I feel confident that I will not starve."

"You may be able to find work there," the girl suggested. "That is, if you care to do anything besides card-playing," she hastened to say.

"Oh, as to that, in the condition that I am now in, I will be glad to do anything to make an honest dollar," the sport replied, immediately. "I am a pretty fair miner, and though I will make the honest confession that the life of a sport is more to my taste than any other occupation, yet, on the principle that beggars ought not to be choosers, I am ready to go into anything that offers—crooked games excepted."

"Although I am a sport, yet it is my boast that I have always been a fair and square one, and I am not the kind of man to go into anything that is not perfectly correct."

Just at this point the burro interrupted the conversation with a loud bray.

"Hello!" what is the matter?" Anderson exclaimed.

The donkey was a sagacious little beast and could be depended upon to give warning when anything approached.

He had not given tongue without reason, for when the three by the fire looked round they beheld a roan broncho with a large splash of white extending from his nose to his forehead, a "bald-face," to use the jockey lingo, approaching along the trail from the westward.

"By Jove! here is a streak of luck!" Blake exclaimed, the moment his eyes fell upon the steed.

"Here is a horse to carry me to Painted City—that is if the owner isn't lagging along in the rear."

"He is saddled and bridled!"

"Yes, and has evidently been tethered for, see! the lariat is hanging from his neck!" Katherine exclaimed.

This was the truth. The sharp eyes of the girl had noticed the lariat before either of the men had seen it.

"That would seem to indicate that the owner is not near at hand," Blake observed. "Do you know the horse?"

"No, I never saw him before," the young man replied.

"He has evidently been tethered, and has managed to get away," the sport remarked.

"As a rule, I do not like to meddle with strange horses," he continued. "For in a country like this, when a man is found on the back of a horse which does not belong to him, he must be prepared to give a reasonable explanation of how he happened to get possession of the steed, or else the odds are great that he will be introduced to a long rope and a short tree with scant ceremony."

"But if there is any question about the matter, we can bear witness that you came honestly by the horse," Katherine declared.

"That is true, and so, under the circumstances, I am going to risk the venture!" Blake affirmed.

"I look badly enough as I am, without having to make my appearance in the camp barefooted, and if I meet the owner he ought to be obliged to me for bringing back his horse."

The others agreed that this was true, and, encouraged by their words, the sport proceeded to capture the horse.

This was easily performed, for the beast did not attempt to escape, being evidently a well-trained animal.

Blake vaulted into the saddle.

"Thanks for your hospitality," he cried. "And when we meet in Painted City I will try to return it."

And then he rode away.

#### CHAPTER V. A SURPRISE.

BLAKE'S spirits rose as soon as the little broncho struck into his long lope.

The animal was a capital saddle-horse and his pace was as easy on the rider as though the latter sat in a rocking-chair, but the motion was decidedly more exhilarating.

"Aha, this is something like!" the sport exclaimed after the horse had covered a couple of miles.

"This beast beats Shanks' mare all hollow! I never was disposed to walk when I could ride just as well."

"And now I can bid defiance to the boots. I shall make my appearance in Painted City with my feet covered, which was more than I expected to do this morning."

"Let me see!"

And then Blake was silent for a few moments, busy in reflecting upon the situation. "I really believe the tide of fortune has turned," he remarked. "Heaven knows a worse run of luck, or a longer one, I never saw, but as a rule a sleep and a change of location usually alters matters, and it appears as though it was going to work that way this time."

"When I woke this morning I would have been willing to bet about a thousand to one that I would not get a morsel to eat until I struck Painted City, for they said in Albuquerque that I wouldn't find any houses along the road, and that the country answered to the one mentioned in the old army joke when it was said that if a crow traveled over the ground he would be apt to suffer if he did not take his rations along."

"The statement is correct as far as this trail is concerned, for a more barren and desolate one I don't think I ever saw."

"The meeting with this brother and sister was the first piece of luck, the finding of the horse another, and so I think I am safe in concluding that the tide has turned and in this mining-camp I shall be able to make a raise so as to appear like a gentleman once again."

"Never despair has always been my motto, and while the breath of life is in me I always intend to live up to it."

"It is a deuced funny thing about this horse!" the sport exclaimed, abruptly.

"I wonder what on earth has become of the owner? Of course it is possible that the man tethered the horse, and then went off to attend to some business, but the thing is mighty odd and it looks to me as if there was a big chance there was something wrong about the matter."

By the time that Blake had come to this conclusion he had ridden some six miles, and the way now led through a rolling prairie thickly dotted with small clumps of timber; prairie islands the plainsmen call these "bunches" of trees.

The trail wound around these islands, and as Blake had come at a pretty good rate of speed he allowed his horse to slacken into a walk so as to breathe the animal.

"This is about as pretty a bit of country as I have ever seen in all my travels," the sport remarked, admiringly, as he looked around him.

And hardly had the words left his lips when the current of his thoughts was interrupted in a way which he did not at all admire.

Out from one of the clumps of trees sprang two rough-looking men, their faces covered with black crape.

They were armed to the teeth and in their hands they brandished Winchester rifles which they leveled at the horseman.

Out on the air rung that old familiar western cry:

"Hands up!"

"Oh, yes, you bet!" Blake responded, pulling his steed to a halt immediately, and then raising his hands to signify that he surrendered.

"We are the toll-gatherers of this road, we want you to understand!" the foremost one of the men cried, a huge fellow standing fully six feet high and built like a giant.

"And I give you fair warning too that I ain't the kind of a man wot stands any nonsense, and if you know when you are well off you won't try any foolishness!"

"Oh, that is all right!" Blake exclaimed, a trifle impatiently. "You needn't waste your breath in cautioning me. I am no tenderfoot, but an old rustler, and understand how to conduct myself in little picnics of this kind as well as the man who invented them."

"I have been too well brought up to attempt to offer resistance when all the advantages are against me, and then in this case you are barking up the wrong tree if you expect to be able to make a raise out of me, for I am broke clean down to the bed-rock, and if gold mines could be bought for a cent apiece, I haven't got wealth enough to buy even a smell."

"Oh, come now, it ain't of any use for you to talk that way; you don't fool us a bit!" the brawny ruffian declared.

"Old pard, I am giving it to you as straight as a string!" the sport responded.

"Don't imagine that I am fool enough to believe you will take my word for it," Blake continued. "I am too well acquainted with the way in which you toll-gatherers do business to make any mistake of that kind."

"I comprehend that you will go through the searching process, and the only reason that I



speak is to give you a little warning as to how the thing will pan out, so as to lessen your disappointment a little."

"You are a mighty strange galoot!" the road-agent cried, evidently surprised by the coolness of the sport.

"Strange!" Blake exclaimed. "Well, now you would be safe in betting all the ducats that you have got, or ever expect to get in this world on that! I am the stranger from Strangeville, and don't you forget it."

"You have got a durned lot of gab, and no mistake!" the road-agent growled, and it was plain from the way he spoke that he did not relish the tone of the sport.

"Oh, yes, no one ever accused me of being backward in coming forward when there was any talking to be done!" Blake declared, becoming still more light and airy in his manner when he saw he was annoying the ruffian.

"Wal, I have knowed a heap of men git into lots of trouble along of talking too much!" the big fellow responded, in a threatening way.

"Of course that goes without saying!" the sport retorted. "There are a lot of fools in this world, and fools' voices like their faces are often met in public places, but I am not one of that kind of a hairpin!"

"I will frankly admit that I do enjoy blowing my bazoo once in a while, but I cannot honestly say that indulging in that habit ever got me into any trouble. On the contrary, I have managed to get out of some very tight places by the use of the eloquence which comes so natural to me."

"Wal, pard, you will find that it won't do you no good this time!" the outlaw exclaimed. "Mebbe if you were able to talk your way through a stone wall you might make the trick, but not otherwise."

"Bring on your stone wall and I will take a hack at it!" the sport replied immediately, smiling in the face of his captors.

"Say! you had better hold yer yawp!" the ruffian exclaimed, angrily. "You are too durned fresh, anyway."

The sport laughed outright, much to the surprise of the road-agents.

"Too fresh, eh?"

"Yes, you are—a durned sight too fresh, and if you ain't keeful you will get salted some of these days in a way you won't like!" the big fellow retorted.

"It is a strange fact that no matter where I go, from the rock-bound coasts of the Atlantic to the shores of the Pacific, from the heaven-kissing peaks of Oregon to the sandy wastes of Lower California, ever am I saluted by the same cry, too fresh!" the sport remarked; the speech more intended as one for his own ears than for the others, yet spoken loud enough for them to hear.

The road-agents looked at each other as much as to ask what kind of a man was this odd speaker.

"Wal, durn me if you don't take the cake!" the outlaw chief declared. "I have often heard of you, but I hadn't any idea that you were sich a queer kind of a galoot."

It was now Blake's turn to be surprised.

"You have often heard of me?" he inquired.

"Sart'in!"

"Well, I must confess that I don't understand how that can be possible," the sport declared.

"Oh, I am well posted—you kin bet high on that!" the other exclaimed in a boastful way.

"You may be, but no matter how well posted you are, it is a puzzle to me how you can know anything of me."

"It isn't sich a darned long way to Agua Fria!"

"What has that got to do with it?"

"Ah, now you are trying to play some roots on me, but the game won't work for a cent!" the big fellow declared.

"No, nary time!" chimed in the other.

"We are onto you like a thousand of brick!" the chief ruffian asserted.

"You can't fool us, and if you know when you are well off you won't make any trouble."

"Oh, that is all right!" the sport replied in his easy, careless way. "You will find me to be as agreeable a man to do business with as you ever struck."

"That is where your head is level!" the road-agent responded with an approving nod.

"And now I will trouble you to hand over your we'pons."

The sport laughed.

"Oh, no, that is something I can't do!"

"You had better, or it will be the worse for you; hand 'em over and durned quick too, unless you are anxious for me to drive a bullet right through you!" and as he spoke, the ruffian brought his rifle to the shoulder in a menacing way.

"Don't be in a hurry now, old pard!" the sport suggested. "I haven't any idea of being ugly about this matter. I simply stated that I couldn't give you my weapons, and that is the truth because I haven't got any, not even a tooth-pick."

"You ain't heeled?"

"Nary time."

"That is mighty strange," the ruffian said in a wondering way.

"Well, I know that it isn't the custom for

travelers to go without arms in this country, but owing to the force of circumstances I am compelled to journey in that way."

"I kin understand you gitting yourself up in that outlandish rig, but I never reckon you would leave yer we'pons at home; light down so we kin git a chance to s'arch ye."

Blake complied with the command, but he was considerably puzzled to understand what the fellow meant by the speech, for it was not plain to him how the man could possibly know anything about the matter.

## CHAPTER VI.

### AN EXPLANATION.

"Now don't you try any foolishness," the outlaw chief warned, after Blake had reached the ground.

"Oh, no!"

"Cos we are jest old business every time, and we had jest as lief settle yer hash by putting a bullet through you as not!"

"You have got me foul, of course, and I am not fool enough to throw away my life by attempting to offer resistance," Blake declared.

"That is whar yer head is screwed on right!" the big fellow asserted.

"I would be the darnest kind of foolishness for you to try any game of the sort, 'cos I am not only big enuff to chaw you right up, but my pard hyer stands all ready to let daylight through you, and then thar's another pard of mine ahind you ready to take a hand in the fun if he is needed."

Blake cast a glance around, and, sure enough, there was a third road-agent in his rear, also with his face hidden like the others, but he carried his rifle slung on his back, and kept watch with a big revolver.

"You see you are in the worst kind of trap, and you don't stand no show at all to git out!" the outlaw chief declared.

"Yes, I must admit that you have the thing pretty well arranged," Blake remarked.

"You kin bet all yer rocks on it!" the big fellow cried.

"When Captain Blood goes in for business, you kin bet yer life that he is going to have everything fixed to the queen's taste!"

"Captain Blood?" ejaculated Blake.

"Yes, that is me—that is my handle!"

"It is a good one; mighty big idea for a man in your line to select some awe-inspiring cognomen of that sort—something likely to strike terror into the hearts of the pilgrims who travel on the trail where he operates; it makes your work a heap sight easier if you scare your game out of their boots right at the beginning."

"You are a darned cheeky cuss, anyway!" the road-agent chief cried, angrily.

"And I want you to understand, too, that I don't like the way you are talking at all!" he continued. "It strikes me that you are kinder making game out of a man 'bout my size, and that is something that I don't allow any two-legged critter to do!"

"If I had three or four legs you would not object, hey?" asked Blake in a bantering tone.

"You had better let up on this hyer if you don't want me to warm you!" the big fellow exclaimed, threateningly.

"Oh, that is all right, no offense intended, Captain Blood," the sport asserted, smiling in the face of the angry ruffian.

"You ought not to get angry at a little joke, you know."

"I don't like jokes, and if you know when you are well off you won't try no jokes on me!" the outlaw exclaimed.

"Now I am going to overhaul you so as to find out how much wealth you have in your clothes."

"Don't get mad now if I indulge in a smile," the sport observed. "For, really, upon my word, I can't help it."

"Why, old pard, you might as well tap one of these trees with the expectation of getting a stream of good rye whisky out of it as to search me with the impression that any valuables would be found in my clothes."

The road-agent gave vent to a hoarse laugh.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he roared. "Wal, darn my cats! if this hyer thing ain't 'bout as smart as any game I ever run across, but it won't work for a cent!"

"No, sir-ee, nary time!" he continued. "You kin bet yer life that I am right up to yer tricks, and yer don't fool me."

"Pard, I haven't any idea what you are driving at, so perhaps you will explain."

"Oh, yes, you think you are mighty smart!" the ruffian declared. "But afore we get through with this little affair I reckon you will find that there are some other people in the world who are jist as smart as you are."

"You are awful cunning to go and rig yourself up like a durned old tramp, and I s'pose you reckoned you could ride to Painted City without anybody gittin' onto you, but whar you made the mistake was in holding on to this bald-face boss."

"You could alter your appearance all right, but the blamed broncho would give you away every time!"

This speech gave Blake a chance to see just how the land lay.

He was the victim of a mistake.

The outlaws were laying in wait for the owner of the bald-face broncho, and when he came along, mounted on the steed, they fell into the error of thinking he was the man for whom they waited, the ruffians evidently not being well acquainted with the party whom they had selected for a prey.

"Pards, I don't want to make you feel bad, but I really am obliged to worry you a little," the sport said.

"You have made the biggest kind of a mistake," he continued.

"A mistake!" exclaimed the big fellow.

"How's that?" ejaculated the other, while the third man came nearer, anxious to hear all that was said.

"Who do you take me to be?"

"Oh, you are going to try and pull some wool over our eyes, eh?" cried the outlaw chief, suspiciously.

"Oh, no, only going to let you understand just how this thing is," the sport replied.

"You have spoken as if you knew something about me, and I know mighty well that you don't; for I am a stranger in this country, and I feel certain that none of you fellows can possibly know anything about me."

"My name is Jackson Blake, and I claim to be a first-class sport; on the Pacific Slope, where I am pretty well known, I am often called the Fresh of 'Frisco, and it is possible that if any one of you three has traveled much west of the Rockies you may have heard of me under that name."

The first two road-agents shook their heads, but the third, the man in the rear, who had come up so he was only a couple of yards away, ventured the remark that he had "heered tell of a galoot who went by that handle."

"And the feller wot told the yarn sed as how the Fresh was the nerviest, cheekiest devil that ever stepped in shoe-leather!" the man declared in conclusion.

"Much obliged to your friend for the compliment!" the sport declared, with a bow.

"I am the man, Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco!"

"Oh, no! that yarn is too thin!" the big fellow declared, decidedly.

"You can't play no game of that kind on me, nohow you kin fix it!" he continued. "I know you like a book although I never laid eyes on you before, but I have heard of you often ernuff, and heard you described, so I know thar ain't no mistake 'bout it."

"You ain't no Fresh of 'Frisco! Your name is Fernando Tompkins—Flowery Tompkins, as all the boys call you, 'cos you have got sich a gift of the gab, and you run a big stock ranch at Agua Fria."

"Oh, no, I am not the man at all! In fact, I never even heard of him! You have made a mistake. I never was at Agua Fria in my life, and am a sport, not a rancher."

"It won't work, old pard!" the road-agent declared in a dogged way. "I know better, and I understand to an iota jest the game you are playing."

"You made a deal yesterday with Michael Vernal, Alcalde of Painted City, to buy the First Hop Mine from him for three thousand dollars, agreeing to pay the cash over by nine o'clock this morning."

"It war a mighty big bargain for you, Flowery, and you wouldn't have got it if you hadn't been able to put the cash right up, for thar's a lot of men in the camp who would be willing to have given four thousand for it if the alcalde would be willing to give a little time on the payments."

"All this is so much Greek to me!" Blake declared. "I never was in Painted City—this is my first visit to this section, and so I don't know anything about the alcalde or his mine."

"That will do for a bluff, but I am right onto you!" the road-agent cried with dogged persistence.

"You started for yer ranch last night to git the money, and when me and my pards hyer got wind of the thing we reckoned that the three thousand ducats would come in mighty handy to us, and knowing that you would be along the trail early in the morning we laid in wait to relieve you of the money."

"Oh, yes, that part of the affair is perfectly plain to me," Blake remarked. "But you see the trouble is, you have got the wrong pig by the ear. I am not the rancher!"

"Ah, bosh! I know better!" the big fellow declared.

"Don't I tell you that I am onto your game?" he continued. "And so what is the use of your trying to fool me with any cock-and-bull story 'bout your being somebody else?"

"It won't go down, you know. I won't have it! Of course, I am willing to allow that this dodge of yours, gitting yourself up like a blamed tramp, is a mighty good one, and if I was a dull sort of a rooster, without any brains, mebbe you could have worked it, but the boss is a dead give-away, as I said afore, and if you had been as smart as you think you are, you wouldn't have ridden a beast that everybody knew was yours."



"My friends, you are going to be stuck in the worst kind of a way if you think you are going to get any wealth out of me," Blake declared.

"I tell you that you are dead wrong! I am not the man at all, but a busted sport, who hasn't even two coppers to rub together!"

And then the sharp related the particulars of how he had been cleaned out in Albuquerque, his taking to the road, meeting with the brother and sister, and how the horse had chanced to stray along the trail.

The road-agents looked at each other, but the masks hid the doubts which were written on their faces, for the story made a decided impression.

"Wal, mebbe you are giving it to us straight," the outlaw chief said. "But if I was going to put up any wealth on the thing, I reckon I would be more inclined to bet that you are Flowery Tompkins than that you ain't!"

It was plain that the speaker was one of those obstinate men who are so hard to convince.

"One thing is sart'in," the third one of the road-agents remarked. "And that is, that the Andersons are prospecting up in the foot-hills, 'cos I seed 'em yesterday myself."

"Yes, but that don't prove that this cuss ain't the man we are arter," the chief argued.

"Go ahead and search me!" Blake exclaimed.

"Satisfy yourself in that way!"

"We will, you bet, and mighty durned quick too!" the outlaw chief declared.

"And if you have got the ducats hid away in your clothes anywhar you kin bet high that I will find them," the big fellow added. "Cos I am going to s'arch you from head to heel!"

And the road-agent was as good as his word, but he only had his labor for his pains.

Not a bit of money did he discover, and terribly annoyed was the fellow at his ill-success.

"Wal, durn my cats! if this don't beat all I ever heered tell on!" he exclaimed.

"It is just as I told you, pard," the sport remarked. "You are barking up the wrong tree. I told you a good straight story, but you would not believe me. You have made a mistake. I am not the rancher for whom you are laying in wait. On the contrary I am a stranger in this country, a card-sharp by trade and am on my way to Painted City because it is a new mining-camp and I understood that things are booming there."

"I told you a true story too of how I happened to be in so bad a fix, and as proof that my yarn is a straight one, that I am just as I represent myself to be, a sport from Sportville, I stand ready to play a little game of 'draw' with any of you gentlemen if you happen to have a deck of cards handy."

The outlaws looked at each other in wonder at this suggestion.

"I am rather averse to blowing my own horn," the captive continued. "Self-praise I despise, but when a man knows he is a big chief in a certain line, I don't consider that he is doing much bragging if he mildly states the fact."

"Now I am a big chief at cards, and no mistake! and I reckon I can quickly prove it to all of you if any man of your party has the backbone to come into a game with me."

"Wal, I dunno," the big fellow observed, scratching his head in a thoughtful way. "This hyer yarn of yours is so t'arnel strange that I don't really know what to make of it."

"Mebbe it is all right and straight, and you ain't Flowery Tompkins, but it is mighty funny that you are riding his bald-face hoss."

"I will have to admit that the circumstance by which I got hold of the steed is a strange one, and the only way I can account for it is that the owner did start for Painted City this morning and met with some accident on the way."

"Wal, I never thought of that," the road-agent leader observed, in a thoughtful way.

"This idea of yours of lying in wait for the rancher, so as to relieve him of his cash, is a good one, and I should not be surprised if some one else thought of it, too, and managed to get ahead of you."

"Mebbe so; durned ef it don't look like it," the other fellow responded.

"They got the rider, possibly shot him from an ambush as he rode along the trail, and the beast, startled by the firearms, broke away and put for home; that is natural, you know, under the circumstances."

"Yas, I s'pose so," the big ruffian responded, slowly, evidently much perplexed.

"It is a very odd thing, you know, that brilliant ideas of this kind often come to three or four men right at the same time, and in this case, as the other party were nearer the rancher's home than your gang, they made the raffle and you missed it."

"I reckon you have got it down pretty fine, but durn sich luck!" the outlaw chief exclaimed, in disgust.

"Yes, it is enough to make a man weep and tear his hair," the sport responded. "To lay in wait for a fellow from whom you confidently expected to catch a cool three thousand ducats, and then bag a clean-busted sport with nary shekel to his name is really disgusting."

"But I say, touching that leetle game of draw which I suggested," the sharp continued. "Some one of you fellows ought to have sand enough to give me a chance to get some of his wealth."

"Yes, but what are you going to put up for a stake?" the road-agent demanded.

"As you hav'n't a copper to your name I don't see how you kin play."

"Oh, I was going to put up my clothes as a stake," Blake responded.

The ruffians laughed outright at the idea.

"Pard, you kin jest take the rag off the bush, you kin!" the outlaw chief declared.

"Why any man would be a fool to go a dollar on them old rags!"

"Well, a man ought to be willing to put up a fiver just for the sake of having some fun," the sharp declared.

"I reckon that none of us will!" the big fellow replied. "We are not such fools!"

"Is that so now? Well I am sorry, for I was in hopes to get some of you into a game so as to give me a stake to operate on when I get to Painted City."

"Durn yer impudence!" the outlaw chief exclaimed. "You won't git no stake out of us, and we hain't got no keerds either. I wish we had so we could jest show you that you ain't half so smart as you think you are. But we can't stay talking hyer with you all day, for we got biz to look arter."

"And a word afore we go! Don't let yer tongue wag too freely 'bout this leetle swope, or else you will be apt to cuss the day when you met Captain Blood!"

"I shall bear your warning in mind," the sport responded with a polite bow.

Then the outlaws departed.

In a clump of trees near at hand they had concealed their horses and these they mounted, riding away to the northward.

"I owe you one, Captain Blood, and I always pay my debts!" the sport remarked as he vaulted into the saddle.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE ALCALDE.

MICHAEL VERNAL, alcalde of the mining-town, known as Painted City, was seated in the apartment, in the rear of his store, which he dignified by the title of office.

The alcalde was a tall, muscular, dark-browed man of forty, or thereabout, of foreign descent, evidently a Mexican—a Greaser—as his enemies persisted in saying, but this Vernal denied, declaring that he was an American by birth.

He kept the largest store in the camp, which was situated in the largest building the town could boast, a two-storied frame structure in the center of the town.

Vernal's store and alcalde's office occupied the lower part, and in the upper story he lived.

The alcalde was a bachelor; his sister assisted him in taking care of the store, and was the presiding goddess in the realms above.

Serena Vernal, the sister was called, a woman of fully twenty-five, although she insisted that she was not over twenty.

Tall and swarthy-faced, like her brother, rather masculine in her appearance, yet with her red-gold hair and dark blue eyes she possessed a certain dashing beauty which was decidedly attractive.

The little clock upon the wall showed that it was about half-past eight.

Vernal was busy with a book of accounts, and in the store without, Serena waited upon a customer.

Through the open door, opposite to which he sat, the alcalde had a full view of all that went on in the store.

He noticed that his sister was holding quite a conversation with the miner who was making some purchases, and judged from the expression upon her face that she was not pleased with what the man said.

The miner was one of the gossips of the camp; he was called Limber Smith, because he was tall and lathy in appearance, and had a peculiar habit of trying to agree with everybody with whom he came in contact.

The miners, who are usually a straight up-and-down set of fellows, apt to stick to their opinions with the tenacity of bulldogs, and generally ready to back them up by a resort to physical force, if necessary, did not have a good opinion of Smith, because, as they declared, he did not have any more backbone than an eel, and was ready to be all things to all men.

His neighbors could not gainsay but what he was always agreeable and willing to do what he could for anybody, still for that they didn't take any stock in a man who hadn't any opinions of his own, or if he did possess opinions, was afraid to stand up for them.

"Now then, what is that fool of a Smith saying to Serena to so disturb her?" the alcalde mused, as he noted the annoyed look upon the face of his sister.

The miner completed his purchases and departed, then Serena came immediately to the door leading to the rear apartment.

"What is this I hear about your selling the First Hop Mine?" she exclaimed in the vigorous,

decisive way so common to her, and as she spoke she leaned against the side of the door, so that while she conversed with her brother she could keep an eye on the store.

"Was that what Smith was talking about?"

"Yes, and I couldn't believe it at first."

"Why shouldn't you believe it?"

"Of course I understand that it is always good policy to sell when one can get more than a thing is worth, but in this case you are not making a good trade if Smith has got it right."

"What did he say about the matter?"

"He stated that you had agreed to sell the mine to Flowery Tompkins for three thousand dollars, and further said that all the town was wondering at the cheapness of the price."

"A good many of the miners have not business enough of their own to occupy their minds, and so they must needs talk about their neighbors' affairs," the alcalde observed with a dark, inscrutable smile.

"It isn't true, then!" Serena exclaimed.

"Not exactly."

"That is just what I told Smith, for I knew that you had been offered four thousand dollars for the property."

"Ah, yes, but that was not in cash, you know," the alcalde replied.

"There were three men in the deal, and all they could raise in clear cash was six hundred dollars, and the rest was to be on mortgage."

"What difference does that make?" the woman demanded. "You are not suffering for the money, and the mortgage would have been just as good for you."

"Yes, but it is always customary to make a reduction for cash, you know," the alcalde observed with another one of his peculiar smiles.

"Oh, nonsense!" the woman cried. "I know you too well to believe that you would pay any heed to any reasoning of that kind. You do not need the money, and you would not be foolish enough to throw away a thousand dollars."

"Well, I reckon you are right as far as that goes. I am not the man to sacrifice sense to sentiment."

"But then I may have been actuated by another thought," the alcalde continued.

"This rancher, Flowery Tompkins, is rich, a bachelor, and as good a catch for any woman as there is in this section. It is well-known that he is one of your admirers—in fact the gossips say that it is a close race between Tompkins, the rancher, Sandy Torquis, the gambler—proprietor of the Canary-bird Saloon, and Martin Anderson, who is noted for having about the poorest luck of any miner in the camp."

The color rose in the girl's face.

"What are you talking about?" she said. "Do you want to make me angry by retailing the idle gossip of the town?"

"Oh, no, and Serena, my queen, you mustn't be annoyed because I repeat to you the observations of the miners."

"They had better mind their own business!" the woman exclaimed with blazing eyes.

"People will talk, you know, and any one who attempted to stop the wagging of idle tongues in a camp of this kind would have no easy job."

"Oh, yes, I know that, and of course I am foolish to pay any attention to what is said. The fools will talk, of course," Serena observed, her proud lip curling in contempt.

"Now, under these circumstances, knowing that there is a chance that one day the rancher may request me to give him my sister, is it not natural I should be inclined to give him a bargain?"

"Oh, nonsense!" Serena exclaimed immediately. "I know you too well to believe that! And you understand too that I do not care a snap of my finger for this fat-headed rancher, and when he attempts to compliment me in his extravagant way it is as much as I can do to keep from laughing in his face."

"Come now, you wrong him!" the alcalde declared. "He is a sensible fellow enough although he does delight to indulge in flowery language; but few men are there in this world though without some peculiarity."

"You know very well why I encourage the attentions of the rancher, and it is idle for you to pretend that you do not."

"I have never said anything about the matter," the girl continued, "for I knew you would understand the game I was playing."

"You took a fancy to this dark-eyed American beauty—this Katherine Anderson—but it was plain that she looked with favorable eyes upon the rancher, who fell over head and ears in love with her as soon as she arrived in the town."

"Yes, it is true; he was extremely attentive," the alcalde remarked with a dark look upon his swarthy face.

"And I made up my mind to help you along by getting the rancher away from her."

"I succeeded too!" she added with a glance of triumph in her proud eyes.

"Yes, you played the game beautifully; there is not a doubt of that," the alcalde admitted.

"This girl is a proud minx, you know, as proud in her way as I am in mine, and she is not one that will ever be likely to pardon a faithless



lover who deserted her for another girl; so you see by taking the rancher for my slave I made a chance for you to win the girl."

"I am much obliged to you, but I am afraid I cannot help you as much with the brother as you have aided me with the sister."

"I shall win him yet!" Serena exclaimed in a tone of conviction. "I have set my heart on it, and when I am determined I am not one to falter or stop to count the obstacles in the way."

"One thing is certain, the man is not in love with anybody else, so I have no rival to fear."

"And then too I suspect you have cunningly taken advantage of the gambler's admiration for you to get him to aid your purpose."

"I have," the girl replied with a smile full of deep cunning.

"When Anderson first came to the town he was as steady as a clock—stuck to his work and therefore prospered, but when I made up my mind to win him I shrewdly contrived to make Sandy Torquis think I was attracted to Anderson because I thought he was such a model young man and was doing so well."

"I see, and that gave Sandy a cue how to act."

"Exactly! He set to work and by means of his friends managed to entice Anderson into his saloon, and gradually he has been led on until he has become as desperate a gamester as there is in the camp, and as he knows very little about playing he loses constantly."

"And all the time I suppose that Sandy is chuckling to himself, under the impression that he has managed to get Anderson out of your good books."

"Yes, undoubtedly! The fool doesn't comprehend that he has reduced Martin to such a condition that he has been obliged to ask favors at my hand."

"I trust him for whatever he wants, and the other day, when he happened to remark that he must strike some money pretty soon or else he would be bothered, as he had a creditor running after him, I succeeded in getting him to take a loan of twenty-five dollars from me, telling him that I had the money—had no use for it, and he could have it just as well as not."

"A deep game, and skillfully played!" the alcalde remarked, with an approving nod.

"Yes, I think so."

"It is the most natural thing in the world for a man to fall in love with a good-looking woman who is trying to do all in her power to aid him."

"That was my calculation."

"I think it is a correct one, and I wish I was half as sure of winning the sister as you are of gaining the brother."

"If you play your game carefully, I do not think you will have any difficulty in succeeding, although it will probably take time," Serena remarked.

"The girl is devotedly attached to her brother, and after I succeed in getting him firmly bound to me, I will do my best to get him to persuade his sister to accept your suit."

"Thanks; I will not forget your aid," the brother declared.

"I think you are right, too, in your assumption that we will be certain to attain success, although it may take time," he continued. "Anderson cannot go on very long unless he is lucky enough to strike a paying lead; his claim has petered out, and I have been told by some of his neighbors that he isn't taking more than a dollar a day out of it."

"Oh, I know that he does not get enough to live on, for he is behind over fifty dollars with us, and then, too, if he happens to make a little strike—finds a small 'pocket'—and takes out ten or fifteen dollars' worth of gold, he hurries off as fast as he can to lose it at Sandy's Canary-bird Saloon."

"Yes, the man has got the gambling fever in the worst way, and one of these days when the fit is on him stronger than usual he will be very apt to sell himself to you for a small loan."

"That is my calculation; but to return to this sale of the First Hop property—I do not understand it at all."

"You are not acquainted with all the particulars," the alcalde remarked.

"Explain then!"

"Yesterday the rancher bantered me to sell, and on the spur of the moment I agreed to do so on these conditions: he was to pay me two hundred dollars in cash then, and three thousand dollars more, in cash, mind you, by nine o'clock this morning, and if the payment was not made before the stroke of nine, then he forfeits his deposit of the two hundred."

"Ah, yes, I see; you think he will not come to time and you will gain the deposit."

"That is my idea."

"But I do not understand why you should think so!" the girl exclaimed.

"I do not have a high opinion of the rancher's shrewdness, yet everybody says that he is a good business man, and he certainly has made money on his ranch, and if he was not certain that he could pay the three thousand dollars it seems to me to be absolutely sure that he would not have made any such agreement."

"Well, it was done on the spur of the moment, and I thought the chances were good that

he would not be able to make the payment," the alcalde remarked.

"Three thousand dollars is a large sum of money for a man to keep on a ranch, then, even if he has the money, it is a long ride from here to Agua Fria, and there are the dangers of the road to be encountered."

"The dangers of the road?" the girl repeated, slowly, a dark look on her face.

"Yes, that is what I said," the alcalde responded. "You know that this road-agent who calls himself Captain Blood, with his band has operated on the trail between Painted City and Albuquerque."

"Yes, I know, but they have not troubled anybody for a long time."

"But is not that owing to the fact that no one has passed along the trail who has been worth robbing?" the alcalde asked, shrewdly.

"There may be something in that."

"When the coach makes its treasure trip it always has a strong guard, so the road-agents don't stand any chance to get at it, and I assume that the fellows are well aware of the precautions taken to head them off."

"Oh, yes, all such bands always have their spies in the towns."

"Exactly, and it is pretty certain that their spies are right here in Painted City, and it is my notion that when this Captain Blood hears that Flowery Tompkins is going to ride from Agua Fria to Painted City with three thousand dollars in his pocket, the chances are great the road-agents will be in waiting to relieve him of the money at some convenient point on the road for the transaction of such a piece of business."

A dark smile came over the expressive features of the woman, and she nodded her head in approval.

"You are right, my brother," she said, "I feared that you had made some mistake, but now I am satisfied that it is not so."

"As a rule I do not make mistakes in matters of this kind," the other replied.

Then he glanced at the clock.

"You note the time?"

"Yes, it lacks but twenty minutes to nine."

"Correct!"

"Within twenty minutes the rancher must be here or his two hundred dollars will be forfeited."

"Yes, I shall be that amount ahead, but Captain Blood and his gang will fare better than I, for they will corral three thousand."

"Well, you must call upon the road-agent to divide!" Serena declared, with a meaning smile.

"He certainly ought to be willing so to do, for if I had not arranged the scheme he would not have been able to get a cent."

"It was a capital trick!" the girl declared.

"As smart a game as I have ever known you to play, and yet it is not the first plot your cunning brain has hatched!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

AGAIN the dark, inscrutable smile appeared on the swarthy face of the alcalde, and he nodded his head complacently, thus showing that the words of the girl were pleasant to his ears.

"Ah, well, I was not born yesterday," he remarked.

"And then, too, it is not so difficult a matter to get the best of these North Americans. The most of them are a set of dull brutes, and they will walk blindly into the plainest kind of a trap."

"When it comes to fighting they are as brave as lions, and do not seem to know the meaning of the word fear, but of cunning games—of making the head render the work of the hands more easy, they have little knowledge."

"That is true: they have no finesse—can not plot or scheme, but proceed in all their plans with brutal frankness."

"It lacks but fifteen minutes to the hour—our man will not come!" the alcalde exclaimed.

But hardly had the words left his lips when he was amazed to see the rancher make his appearance in the store doorway.

"Caramba!"

Out came the old Mexican oath in deep, suppressed tones from the lips of the alcalde.

Never was there a man more disappointed.

"By what devil's chance has this cursed fool escaped the trap which I set for him so carefully?" he uttered to the girl.

She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. No reply in words was possible, for the rancher was advancing through the store, followed by a couple of his friends.

Serena turned and greeted him with a charming smile, which the rancher responded to by removing his hat and making a profound bow.

"Good-morning!" he exclaimed. "The sight of your beautiful face is as refreshing to me as a glass of sparkling champagne to a man parched with thirst!"

And then he made another bow.

Fernando Tompkins was a man of thirty, rather short in stature, but broad-shouldered and muscular, with a round, rosy face full of good-nature.

In fact, he had more the appearance of a

great, overgrown boy than a man, for he had but a light beard and was always smoothly shaven.

"Ah, Ferdy, you are a bad boy!" she exclaimed, addressing him by the name by which he was commonly called.

"You are a wicked, deceitful flatterer! and I am getting so that I don't believe a word you say," and Serena shook her finger archly at the rancher.

He grinned and made another low bow.

"Now, really, you must not say that, or you will drive me to the dark realms of despair!" he responded.

"Why, I couldn't flatter you if I tried, you know," he continued.

"A jewel of a girl like yourself is above all flattery. You cannot paint the rose, whiten the lily, or gild refined gold, nor is it possible for words to do justice to a queen among women!"

"Oh, you are getting worse and worse!" Serena declared. "And if you do not stop these extravagant compliments, I shall really be obliged to run away whenever I see you coming!"

"You ought not to do that, for then I shall have to run after you, and I am getting so deuced fat that running is not my best holt!" the rancher responded.

This conversation gave the alcalde time to recover from the fit of rage into which he had been thrown by the unexpected appearance of the man whom he so surely believed had become the prey of the road-agents, and so when the rancher entered the room, he received him as cordially as though the young man had been the dearest friend he had in the world.

Serena kept her position by the door, so she could overhear the conversation, for she was curious to learn how it was that the rancher had escaped the trap which had been so carefully laid for him.

"Well, I am on time!" Tompkins exclaimed, with a glance at the clock as he took the chair toward which the alcalde waved him with his hand.

"Yes, on time!" the official repeated, in a mechanical way.

"I s'pose when you saw the hands creeping round so near to nine, that you rather reckoned I would not show up in time!" the rancher exclaimed, with a jolly laugh, which betrayed a deal of satisfaction.

"Yes, I had about given you up," the alcalde admitted.

"I could have been here half an hour before, but stopped to take a social drink with my friends here, and we got to chinning over our liquor, and so wasted some time."

"Yes, I see."

"By the way, has my superintendent, Teddy O'Dare, been in this morning?"

The alcalde shook his head.

"Haven't seen him?"

"I have not."

"And neither has any one else in the camp, as far as I can discover, and it strikes me that it is about as queer a thing as I have run across lately. 'Can these things be and overcome us like a summer cloud without our special wonder?'"

The rancher was an educated man, had been a close student, was an industrious reader, and particularly great on quotations, hence his nickname of Flowery Tompkins.

"Did you expect to meet Teddy in Painted City this morning?" the alcalde asked.

"Of course! He was to leave the ranch an hour after me, and as he took the regular trail while I made a circle, he ought to have got here before me."

The alcalde looked surprised, and there was no affectation in the look, while Serena, who had resumed her former position by the door, listened with all her ears, although pretending not to be particularly interested.

"Oh, you did not come by the road, then?" the alcalde remarked.

"No, Teddy came by the road, while I made a circle to the northward, going about ten miles out of my way," the rancher explained.

"But why did you adopt such a roundabout course?" Vernal asked.

"Well, you see it all came from a conversation that I had with my mother when I got home last night," the young man replied.

"At the supper-table we got to talking about the deal I had made with you. Teddy was with me here yesterday, and knew all about it, and when my mother discovered that I intended to ride to Painted City this morning with three thousand dollars in my clothes, she at once declared that it was just like tempting Providence."

"I do not see what danger there was to be apprehended," the alcalde remarked in his smooth, oily way.

"Well, that is just what I told the old woman, but, alcalde, you know what women—no offense intended to you, Miss Serena," he exclaimed with a gallant bow, as he suddenly remembered that the girl was standing in the doorway listening to his words.

"I ought to have said, you know what some old women are."



"Now my mother, although she is pretty old, is just as smart as a cricket and as sharp as a steel-trap, but she is full of all sorts of notions, and when she once gets an idea into her head you might as well try to talk a tree out of the ground as to get her to change her mind by arguing with her."

"Yes, yes, I understand; many people, both men and women, old and young, are so constituted," the official remarked.

"When they once get an idea in their heads it is no easy matter to get it out again; words are of no avail and only the stern argument of actual facts will persuade them that they are wrong."

"Exactly! you have got it down to a fine point!" the rancher exclaimed.

"Well, my mother was so certain that I would be robbed, and perhaps murdered on the road if I attempted to carry three thousand dollars in cold cash in broad daylight from my place to this camp, that I will be hanged if at last she didn't persuade me it was a kinder resky thing to do."

"Ah, but who would know that you were going to make the trip?" the alcalde suggested.

"That was just what I said," Tompkins replied. But when the old woman asked if the deal hadn't been spoken of in the camp here after it was made, I was obliged to admit that it had been, and there was no getting away from the fact that a good many people knew about the affair.

"Yes, that is true—little doubt of it," the alcalde admitted.

"Teddy, who is a reckless, devil-may-care fellow you know, anyway, laughed at the idea that there was any danger, but said even if any road-agents laid in wait for me, that if he and I were together, well armed, and on the watch for danger it would not be possible for the most desperate outlaws to succeed in an attack on us."

"There was a deal of sense in that remark," the alcalde observed with a grave shake of the head.

"Maybe there is, but my mother wouldn't have it for a cent!" the rancher declared.

"Her notion was that unless I went with a regular body-guard of cowboys the chances were big that I would be killed on the road."

"Oh, no! it is absurd!" Vernal declared.

"It was all out of the question, of course!" the rancher affirmed. "I did not want to ride into Painted City at the head of an army, just as if I had come to raid the town, so, after thinking over the matter a while, an idea came to me."

"If road-agents had made up their minds to go for me they would lie in wait at some point on the trail, of course; now if I abandoned the trail and took a circuitous route to the north I would be able to flank the outlaws and get into Painted City without their having a chance to get at me."

"Yes, yes, a very clever move!" the alcalde declared, a smile on his face, but with rage in his heart.

"I didn't say anything about this little scheme until I was alone with my mother and Teddy," the rancher continued; "I wasn't afraid to confide in that Irishman, you see, for I knew he could be trusted even with my life."

"Oh, yes, yes, he is a stanch fellow!" Vernal affirmed. "And when I outlined my scheme, Teddy, who is as obstinate as a mule, declared that it was all nonsense to go to so much trouble, for there wasn't any danger, and to prove it he would take my bald-face broncho, the horse I usually used, you know, and ride over the trail to this camp."

"If there were any road-agents on the way they would be pretty certain to mistake him for me when they saw the horse, and go for him."

"Ah, yes; but it seems to me it was rather a risky thing for the man to do, that is, if there really was any danger to be apprehended," the alcalde remarked, thoughtfully.

"That is exactly what my mother said, and as she was provoked at Teddy for setting up his judgment in opposition to hers, she declared she thought it was a good idea for him to make the trial, for she felt certain he would get a lesson which would be apt to knock some sense in his thick head!" And the rancher laughed heartily as he reflected upon the passage-at-arms between the angry old woman and the thick-headed, obstinate Irishman.

The alcalde smiled in sympathy with the merriment of his visitor, but the pangs of rage were gnawing at his heart, for it was now plain to him how it was that his carefully planned scheme had failed.

"And I say, alcalde, it really looks, too, as if something had happened to Teddy, doesn't it?" the rancher continued. "For he ought to have been here long before me."

"He may have loitered on the way," Vernal suggested.

"Yes, that is true. I hope he is all right, for Teddy is a mighty good fellow, although as obstinate as they make 'em, and I would be mighty sorry if he has come to grief," the rancher observed.

"Oh, he will make his appearance shortly, beyond a doubt," Vernal remarked.

"And now we will close up this deal if you are

agreeable," Tompkins said, drawing out a pocketbook well stuffed with bills.

In his heart the alcalde felt more like killing the rancher than trading with him, but he was such a master of the art of trickery that no one of his visitors had any suspicion that he was furiously angry.

The money was paid and the transfer made, and then all of them departed for the nearest saloon, to take some liquid refreshments to celebrate the trade.

This place was kept by a big, stout, middle-aged Dutchman, and the sign on the window proclaimed that it was Jake's Gem of the West Saloon.

After drinking success to the new owner of the First Hop claim, the party adjourned to the street, reaching the open air just in time to see the Fresh of Frisco ride up on the bald-face broncho.

The Gem of the West "shebang," as the miners usually termed the Dutchman's place, was also the hotel of the town, and situated in the center of the camp, next to Vernal's place of business.

Blake was riding slowly along, and was just opposite the door of the saloon when the party came out.

"Hello, stranger, where did you get that horse?" the rancher exclaimed, as soon as his eyes fell on the sport.

"I caught it on the trail about twenty miles off," the sharp replied, bringing the steed to a halt.

"I was on my way from Albuquerque to this camp, and as I was in hard luck was compelled to hoof it, a thing, gentlemen, which I despise, but there is an old saying, you know, that needs must when the devil drives, and if the Old Boy in black hasn't been after me with a sharp stick since I struck Albuquerque then I don't know what bad luck is."

"But as I was saying I was on my way here, hungry and foot-sore, and happened to meet with a couple from this camp, who were prospecting, the Andersons, brother and sister, and they invited me to have breakfast with them; I gladly accepted, you bet! Then, just as we got through, this horse came along the trail and I captured him at once, for I was heartily tired of hoofing it, and I was not afraid to lay hold of the animal as I had witness to prove that everything was fair and square."

"The Andersons ought have known your horse, Tompkins," the alcalde remarked.

Red in the face grew the young man and he was evidently confused.

"Well, no, I don't think I have met either of them since I owned the horse. I have only had him a couple of weeks," the rancher explained.

"You are the owner then, Mr. Tompkins?" Blake questioned.

"Yes; but I say, did you see anything of an Irishman, just about my size and build, on the trail?"

"No."

"It is strange!" the rancher commented. "He was to have left my ranch at Agua Fria and ride to this camp this morning, using this broncho, and from the fact that you found the horse on the trail it is plain that he started, all right, and I wonder what on earth has become of him."

"That is a subject upon which I cannot give you any information," Blake replied.

"It is certain though that if this horse left Agua Fria this morning, he must have passed me on the trail, and the Andersons also, who were camped near the road, while we were asleep, for the horse came from the west going eastward, evidently making his way home."

"Were there any blood-stains on the horse, or any signs that there had been an accident?" the rancher asked, anxiously.

"No, none at all; only the lariat was unfastened, as though the horse had been tethered and got loose," the sport replied.

"It certainly is very strange and I cannot imagine what could have become of Teddy."

"I can't enlighten you, but I can give you the particulars of a little adventure of my own," the Fresh said.

And then he related how he had encountered the road-agents.

The hearers listened with the utmost attention.

"You see, alcalde, I was waited for on the road!" the rancher exclaimed.

"And if I had come by the regular road, I would have fallen a victim, sure!"

"But according to the story of this man," and the alcalde nodded to the sport, "this Captain Blood's gang did not see the Irishman."

"That is certain, for they were sure I was Mr. Tompkins in disguise," Blake remarked.

"But it may be possible you know that the brilliant idea of going for the three thousand dollars struck two gangs of 'toll-collectors,' and the first gang laid in wait to the eastward of the point where I met this Captain Blood, and they nailed the Irishman, thinking it was the man with the ducats," the sharp continued.

This idea seemed to be a good one, and the hearers expressed their belief that Blake had hit upon the true solution of the mystery.

"Say, ain't you kinder afeard to give this

Cap'n Blood away arter the warning he give you?" one of the miners asked.

"Oh, no, I don't pay any attention to talk of that kind," Blake replied.

"It is all right for a ruffian of this sort to threaten and blow about what he will do when he has a man helpless in his power, but just let me get a chance at Captain Blood when all the advantages are not on his side, and if I don't make him hop round lively then I am not as good a man as I think I am."

This speech was so quietly delivered that it did not produce much impression upon the hearers.

It is sound and fury that takes the multitude, and when a man says in a quiet way that he is a big chief, the crowd are not apt to believe him, for the average big chief of the Western mining-camp is of the half-horse, half-alligator breed, and always loud of voice.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE FRESH SEEKS AN ANGEL.

"MR. TOMPKINS, I am glad to be able to return you your steed," Blake remarked, dismounting as he spoke.

"And very much obliged too for the use of him, for my boots are in such a dreadful condition that if I had not happened to get the horse the odds are big I should have been bootless when I made my appearance in this camp."

"Oh, that is all right," the rancher replied. "Much obliged to you for taking care of the beast."

"Can I speak a word with you in private?" the sport asked.

"Certainly," Tompkins replied.

The two drew apart from the rest.

"I am a sport in hard luck," Blake explained. "Card-playing is my business, and I had the ill-luck to be cleaned out in Albuquerque, and now I am in search of an 'angel' who will have sufficient confidence in me to advance a stake so I can go ahead again. I don't ask it as a gift, you understand, but as a loan which I will repay as soon as I strike a run of luck."

"I suppose though that it will be no luck, no money!" Tompkins observed in a rather sarcastic way.

"Oh, it may take some time, of course," the sharp replied. "I am not promising that I will pitch in and win a small farm on the first night after I strike a town."

"Yes, you 'work by wit and not by witchcraft and wit depends on dilatory time' eh?" the rancher asked.

"Exactly! that speech fits the business as well as though Shakespeare had the vocation of a card-sharp in view when he wrote it."

"You are posted."

"I am no ignoramus."

"So I perceive."

"I seek an angel, for I need a stake the very worst way!" Blake declared.

"I must have some new harness. I cannot really go about in these dreadful old togs much longer, and the cloth is so rotten that I am much afraid that at every step I will walk clean out of the blamed things, and I very much object to astonishing this camp promenading down its main street clad only in my rative modesty."

"Well, I reckon that would not be just the thing!" the rancher declared.

"I am ready to do the fair thing in this matter. I have brought back your horse like a gentleman, and so showed that I want to do the square thing. If you are willing to loan me a stake to go ahead on, I will return it as soon as I can, or if you are of a sporting disposition, I will take you in as a silent partner, and you shall have half my winnings."

"That is certainly a fair proposal, but I never take any chances of that kind," Tompkins replied. "The fact is, I haven't got much sporting blood in me."

"I indulge in a little game of poker once in a while, but never go in deeper than a two-bit ante, and when I get twenty or twenty-five dollars behind the game I always draw out."

"A very sensible resolution for any man who does not reckon to make his living in that way, and if the business-men who play with the pasteboards once in a while would act as you do, we card-sharps would soon become extinct," Blake affirmed.

"Well, there is another line that I do a little in once in a while," the sport continued. "I understand how to use my fists, and if there is any big, overgrown bully in the town who thinks he can whip all creation, just match me against him, Marquis of Queensberry rules, and I will engage to give him all he wants of the noble art of self-defense."

The rancher looked at the sport with great interest, as he made this announcement.

"Well, you don't look much like a bruiser," he remarked, slowly.

"That is true; few men would size me up in that way, and I am not a professional boxer, of course. I don't profess to make my living in the prize-ring, but there are very few men in my profession who do not understand how to handle themselves, and the jay who picks up a card-sharp as an opponent in a scrapping-match, ex-



pecting to have a soft thing of it, is likely to get badly left," the sport declared.

"I will bear your proposition in mind," the rancher observed, slowly. "And if I see a good chance, maybe I will be able to get on a match for you."

"If the man isn't far better than the average, I will be able to get away with him, and I don't care how big he is, either," Blake replied, in his quiet, yet confident way.

The rancher was puzzled, for to his inexperienced eyes the stranger did not look like a man who would make much of a show in a boxing-match.

His idea of a fighter was a bull-headed, beetle-browed fellow, whose general appearance revealed that he was a tough of the first water.

In fact, the rancher, who rather prided himself upon his physical powers, was of the opinion that he himself could make it exceedingly warm for the sharp, although he did not pretend to be a fighting man.

And having this belief, he was not disposed to invest any money in backing the stranger.

"Well, I don't believe there is much chance to do anything in that line," Tompkins remarked.

"The truth is, that things are mighty dull in Painted City now," he continued. "The boom died out long ago; the big strikes, so-called, which people believed were going to turn out regular bonanzas, got down to the bed-rock in short order, and only the small claims are doing anything."

"I understand that business is not brisk."

"There are only a few people who are doing well; not over half a dozen mines, all told, are making any money, and the rest are just paying fair day's wages to the men who are mining them."

"Not a very brilliant outlook for business."

"That is so, and to my thinking it is particularly bad in your line, although you will not have much opposition, for there are not many sports in the town; in fact, there is only one sporting-house that amounts to anything, Sandy Torquis's Canary-bird Saloon."

"Well, really, in a camp of this size, there ought to be room for a man like myself," the sport remarked, reflectively.

"Of course, if business was booming right along, I ought to make big money, but even as it is, it will be mighty strange if I can't manage to pick up a decent living," he continued. "But I must have a stake to start in with, and I really ought to get some clothes, for I don't look fit to go into a game in this outlandish rig."

"That is true enough," the rancher replied.

"How much money do you think you need?"

"I reckon about fifteen dollars would fit me out, pretty well—buy some decent harness, and leave me a little money for a stake."

"I might offer to give you the horse as security, you know," the sport continued, with a perfectly grave face, "but it would be rather rough on a man to offer to give him his own property as security, so I will not do it."

The rancher was a jolly fellow who appreciated a joke, and this remark appealed so strongly to his sense of humor that he laughed outright in the face of the other.

"Upon my word you are as odd a character as I have ever run across!" the rancher declared. "But I have a notion that there is a deal of method in your madness."

"Well, I may be a little cracked in the upper story, but I generally manage to get there all the same."

"Of course, every man is bound to run into a streak of bad luck sometimes, but this one has lasted longer than usual; but the end will come some time, of course."

"Oh, yes, never despair! that is the motto!" Tompkins exclaimed.

"I think you are a pretty square sort of a fellow," he continued. "And so I am going to give you a lift."

Then the rancher drew out his pocketbook and gave the sport three five-dollar bills.

"There is your fifteen, and you can pay me back when you get good and ready."

"All right, thanks! I shall not forget your kindness, and if I can ever do you a service command me."

"Don't mention it!"

Then the two parted. Tompkins rejoined the others, and the Fresh entered Vernal's store, anxious to get rid of his old clothes as soon as possible.

Serena looked askance at the sport as he entered, which was not to be wondered at, for his appearance was decidedly against him, and Blake, perceiving this, made the girl a polite bow and spoke in his smoothest manner.

The girl was a keen observer, and quickly came to the conclusion that the clothes afforded no indication to the man who wore them; there was something about the face of the stranger, too, which made a decided impression upon her; so she became as eager to serve him as though she believed he was going to be a valuable customer.

Blake bought as cheap an outfit as possible, boots, pantaloons, woolen shirt and a hat, but the articles took all of his money with the exception of a dollar. He had to have the things

though and so he paid over the money, and the girl made him a present of a necktie and a handkerchief.

"Much obliged, miss," the sport remarked with a polite bow. "I shall not forget your kindness and if I ever get an opportunity I will be glad to return it."

The speech made such an impression upon Serena—not the words so much as the way they were delivered—that she took the trouble to hunt up a little round pocket mirror, and small comb which she presented to the sport, "for good measure," as she remarked with a friendly smile.

Again Blake thanked her, and then he departed.

Straight to the corral of Dutch Jake's hotel the sport proceeded; there, shielded from view, he removed his old suit and donned the new one, and though the garments bore but a slight resemblance to the elegant clothes which the Fresh usually wore yet he presented a good appearance.

## CHAPTER X.

### SANDY OF THE "CANARY-BIRD."

"THERE, thank Heaven, I have got rid of those old rags!" Blake exclaimed with a sigh of relief as he made Joe Bowers's cast-off suit up in a bundle and thrust it in a corner under some loose boards.

"I never did such a foolish thing as to bet my clothes in my life before, and here I register a vow that I will never be so great a donkey again."

"That fellow must have cast a spell over me so that for the time being I did not know what I was about."

"Just how the thing was worked is not very plain to me, but the fact remains that I acted like a lunatic."

"I heard a wise, long-headed fellow argue once that all men are more or less crazy in some respects, and I will be hanged if I don't think he was about right."

"It is not often though that I get such spells and I will do my best to keep another one from taking possession of me."

"Now, then, let's see if I can't scare up a little business!" the Fresh exclaimed as he marched out of the stable.

"I begin to feel a little like myself again, and if I can only strike some man who thinks he knows how to play poker, I may be able to convince him before we get through the seance that he does not know as much about that delightful game as he thinks he does."

Then the remembrance that he only had a single dollar came into the mind of Blake, and he came to an abrupt halt, shaking his head in a doubtful fashion.

"A dollar! Oh, come! that is a dreadful small stake for a man to start in with!" he declared.

"A man cannot do much plunging when his cash capital consists of a single dollar only."

"I paid more than I expected for my clothes," he continued. "But I had no idea that things were so deuced dear here."

"If the man who runs that store doesn't make money, it will be because he can't sell any goods. If his trade amounts to anything, he ought to be able to retire in a year or two, well-fixed for life."

Then the sport cast his eyes carelessly around him, and his gaze happened to fall upon the Canary-bird Saloon, which was on the opposite side of the street.

"Canary-bird Saloon—Sebastian Torquis," Blake mused, reading the inscription which was over the door of the place.

"And that is the fellow they call Sandy, I suppose. Sebastian is entirely too rich for the blood of these miners, and Sandy is so much better for a handle."

"The name indicates that the keeper of the shebang is a foreigner, but that does not always go out here. Names are cheap in this glorious western country, and even a poor man can afford to change his name every year if he wants so to do."

"I think this Sandy is my mutton, though!" the sport declared, after meditating over the matter for a few minutes.

"Anyway, I will go over and take a look at him."

And having come to this determination, Blake crossed the street and entered the saloon.

This establishment was like the usual one of its class to be found in the mining-camps of the Far West.

There was a small bar in the front, a keno wheel in the center of the apartment, a faro lay-out back of that, and in the rear a couple of small rooms partitioned off for the accommodation of poker parties.

There was only one person in the saloon when the sport entered, and this was evidently the proprietor, for he was a tall, thin man with a gaunt, colorless face, the lower part of which was hidden by a long, light yellow beard; his hair was of the same color, and when the sport got a good look at the man he understood why he got the name of Sandy.

The proprietor sat in a comfortable hard wood arm-chair, tilted back against the wall, by

the side of the window so he could command a view of the street, and was smoking a cigar which he took from his lips as the sport entered.

"How are ye?" he said with a nod.

"I am feeling pretty well," Blake replied, helping himself to a chair.

"Well, you look a durned sight better than you did when you struck the town a while ago," the gambler remarked with a grin.

"You saw my arrival then?"

"Yes, and whar on airth did you git sich a rig? I hain't seen anything like it since I was a boy 'way back in ole Missouri and used for to help dad fix the scarecrows in the corn lot," the other responded with a chuckle.

"It was pretty hard old harness, and no mistake, but in the fix I was in I thought it was a deuced sight better than none, and so I wore it."

"Hobson's choice, eh?"

"Yes, it was that or nothing."

"Things hain't been coming your way lately, I reckon," the gambler observed, reflectively.

"Not much they haven't but as the longest lane must turn I am in hopes that luck will change."

"You have struck this camp at a mighty poor time," Sandy declared with a dubious shake of the head.

"So they tell me."

"The place has got the dry rot. Some night when the wind is high I reckon the hull durned burg will blow away."

"Bad as all that?"

"I'm a-talking and I am a-giving it to you on the dead square."

"Sorry to hear it!"

"Bout everybody is gitting out that kin. The camp has clean gone dead!"

"But she may pick up, you know," Blake suggested in a hopeful way.

"Yes, she may, and then ag'in she moughtened. If I was going to gamble on the thing I reckon I would put up good money that she don't pick up a darned bit."

"Well, you ought to be a judge; a place like this is the pulse of the town."

"Pulse of the town, hey?" exclaimed the gambler in a meditative way.

"Say! darn me if you ain't 'bout right—when biz is good I take in the coin lively, and when it ain't I have to scratch hard for a living."

"Stranger, that is as good a thing as I have heard in a dog's age!"

"Will you have a drink on it?"

"Well, I don't mind a glass of ale, since you are so kind."

"Ale, eh?" exclaimed Sandy as he rose. "Kinder a temperate cuss you are, I reckon. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred take whisky when they are asked to name tha'r p'ison out in this country."

"I am not much of a drinking man," Blake replied, as he followed his host to the bar, leaning upon the front of the counter, while Sandy went behind it and proceeded to open a bottle of ale.

"I never drink any hard liquors during the day," Blake remarked. "For I want to keep my head clear, and a man who indulges in whisky can't do that, but after I get through work and am ready to turn in for the night, I don't mind a good, stiff whisky punch; an English night-cap, you know, and taken in that way I regard it as purely a medicine and I know I am a deuced sight better off for having it."

"Say! you don't want to talk whisky around this camp for a medicine or you will have nine-tenths of the miners swearing that they are sick," the veteran declared with a grin.

The two drank their ale, and then Torquis asked, abruptly:

"What is your business, anyway? You don't look like a miner!"

"No, I am not, although I am got up like one just now, but that is owing to the fact that being a little short of funds I had to buy the cheapest rig I could get hold of, not because I was suited with the articles."

"Ah, yes, I see."

"I am in the same line of business as yourself."

"A sport, bey?"

"Yes, that is what I profess to be."

"And did you come to this camp with the idea of making a stake hyer?"

"That is my little game."

"Well, you will not do it!" Sandy declared in the most emphatic manner.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is, and you kin bet high on it too! As I said afore, this town is dead, and I reckon it would be buried only it can't raise money enough to pay the funeral expenses!" And the gambler laughed heartily at his joke.

"I understand the boom is over, but, really, it seems to me that a single man like myself, under light expenses ought to be able to make a good living in a place of this kind, even if business isn't good."

"I don't think there is one chance out of a hundred for you to do it," the veteran sport responded.

"You see the fact is, the class of people that you want to do business with—the gay boys who get their money easy, and are always ripe for a



good time, have about all shook the town, and only the steady sober-minded fellows, who are content to plod along, yet making a fair living, are left in the durned ole burg."

"No hurrah fellows in the camp then?"

"Well, thar are a few left, but they don't amount to anything—not the kind with the sand to back up ag'in' a sport and lose thar dust like gentlemen," the gambler explained with an expression of deep disgust upon his face.

"Little two-cent fellows, eh?"

"Yes, the bad man gang style galoots who like to fill up on whisky, and go bowling 'round the town; big chiefs, you know, who are hungry for blood and slaughter."

"I understand; such men are to be found in every camp."

"But they ain't worth a cent, you know, for business," the gambler declared. "The loss of a five-dollar note would scare 'em out of thar' boots."

"Why, stranger, things are so bad in this hyer camp that I don't open up my faro game one night a week!"

"Well, well, things are bad then, and it is plain I made a terrible break when I headed for this town."

"You are right for a thousand ducats!"

"How do you manage to pick up a living?"

"Out of the keno-table and this little bar," the other responded.

"I am running keno for two-bits the card, and it is a big game when thar is over three dollars in the pot."

"You see, keno catches these leetle two-cent fellows. They argue, you know, that somebody has got to win the stake, and a man kin go four games for a dollar, so out of my little ten-percent rake on every game I manage to pick up a living, but I am giving it to you as straight as a string, pard, when I say that it is a good day when I take in over ten dollars and when you figure up the cost of the barkeeper, whom I have to put on at night, and the expense of running the thing, you can see that I don't stand a chance to win much on the game."

"That is certainly a fact, but isn't there some men in the camp who will take a plunger once in a while on a poker game—fellows who can be touched for a hundred or so?"

"Oh, no, all those highflyers have quit the town," Sandy replied.

"Once or twice a week there is a little poker party in one of my rooms back hyer," and the gambler nodded toward the rear of the saloon. "But it is only a sort of a friendly game to pass the time away, and when a man gets hit for five dollars he usually thinks it is about time for him to quit."

"Well, this is a lively kind of a camp, I must say!" Blake exclaimed in a tone which plainly showed how unwelcome was this intelligence.

"Lively, oh, you bet! A graveyard is a fool to this town for liveliness!" the gambler declared.

Then an idea occurred to Blake, and he looked at Sandy Torquis in a reflective sort of way.

The veteran sport was a keen observer, and immediately suspected that something was in the wind.

"Now then what are you driving at?" he exclaimed, resting his elbows on the counter and gazing intently in the face of the sport.

"Well, an idea has just come to me," Blake responded. "Why shouldn't you and I have a little fun?"

"You have plenty of sand, of course; a man in your business has got to have it, or else get out of the trade, and I have no doubt you have a few ducats to back up your sand."

"Yes, I have got a few—a mighty sight too few, considering the time I have run this she-bang," the other replied, with a wry face. "And what is more, I intend to keep 'em, too, so you will not rope me into any game."

"Ah, Sandy, you haven't got as much sand as I gave you credit for possessing," the sport declared with a grave shake of the head.

"I haven't got so much sand as I have sense!" the gambler retorted.

"Thar's an old saying, dog won't eat dog," he continued. "I don't know how true it is, but it ought to be if it ain't."

"You and I are both sports; we live on the men who are not sports, and we ought not to go to work to eat each other up."

"Besides, the way things are, thar isn't any use for me to go into a game with you."

"You know you are not well-beeled. If I stood a chance to win two or three hundred dollars, provided I could beat you, why then I might be tempted to go into the speculation, but as it is, I can't win your money because you have not got any, and you might be able to capture a pocketful of mine."

Blake laughed.

A good argument always appealed strongly to him, even though it was directed against his interest.

"Well, pard, I reckon you have figured the thing out about right, and if I were in your place, possibly I should hesitate to play myself," he replied.

"Go get a stake of a hundred or two out of somebody, and then I will play you."

"All right! when I make a raise I will call

on you," and the sport made a movement as if to depart.

"Hold on! how may I call your name?" Sandy asked, his curiosity excited.

"Jackson Blake."

"Jackson Blake," repeated the veteran sport, slowly, and a puzzled look appeared on his face.

"Yes, that is my handle."

"Well, I don't ever remember to have run across you before, and yet your name is very familiar to me."

"I have been a pretty extensive traveler, and during my tour through the West, and on the Pacific Slope, I happened to become mixed up in several affairs which caused considerable talk, and it is possible that you may have heard some of these yarns in regard to my adventures," Blake suggested.

"Yes, mebbe it is that way; your name is certainly familiar to me, and yet I can't remember where I heard about you, and that is odd, for I don't generally forget a thing that I once hear," and the gambler shook his head as if he was very much puzzled by the circumstance.

"It is possible that you have heard of my name used in connection with a nickname which I got on the other side of the old Rockies, and Jackson Blake has slipped out of your memory because I am better known by my nickname."

"I reckon that is it. What is your other handle, anyway?"

"The Fresh of 'Frisco."

The veteran gambler indulged in a prolonged whistle, by means of which he intended to indicate the profound astonishment which had seized upon him.

"Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco!" Sandy Torquis exclaimed, after a slight pause.

"That is my name."

"Well, you kin bet your life that I have heered tell on you, and the man who hasn't hain't never done much traveling among the thoroughbred sports of the West!" the gambler declared.

Blake laughed.

"Well, I believe I am pretty well known."

"And you wanted to rope me into a game!" the veteran continued. "Oh, no, not for Joel—not if this court knows itself, and she thinks she does!"

"Just keep quiet about the thing," Blake continued. "Don't go round telling the men of this lively burg that I am the biggest kind of a wolf, or you'll put me in a good way to starve to death."

"That is all right!" the gambler replied. "I will never give you away. Make my place your headquarters while you are in town, and if you want a drink and can't show your coin, come right in and I will be glad to hang you up for it!"

Blake thanked the sport in suitable terms, and then departed, feeling pretty blue, for he saw that luck was still against him.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE BABY ELEPHANT.

AFTER leaving the saloon Blake proceeded slowly up the street, his hands crossed behind his back, his eyes upon the ground, and his brows wrinkled by the dark lines of care.

The street was almost deserted, only a few people being visible, for during the middle of the day all the miners were at work, and so there wasn't many to stare at the stranger.

"May I be hanged if this isn't about the toughest scrape I ever got into as far as bread and butter are concerned!" the sport muttered, putting his thoughts into words, as was common to him, as to many deep thinkers who are given to the habit.

"I am all right as far as the whisky is concerned. No danger of a famine in that quarter, and that reminds me that there is a deal of truth in the old saying that though a man may lack for bread he seldom has to go without liquor, but as I don't care for whisky, the fact does not improve my position materially."

"Really, the way that things look it seems as if all I can do will be to make a visit to the mines and see if I can get a job of work out of one of them; that is the kind of life that I do not enjoy."

"By Jove! my evil star must have been in the ascendant when I made up my mind to come to this neck of the woods!"

Blake's meditations were interrupted at this point by meeting the rancher and his two friends who had been with him in the alcalde's office.

All three were mounted and had just come from the hotel corral, where their horses had been kept.

"Stranger, we are going to hunt for my Irishman," the rancher said. "Can you give us a description of the spot where you caught the horse?"

"Certainly!" Blake replied, and he immediately did so.

"I know the place!" Tompkins declared. "It is where Little White Creek comes down by the trail."

"Yes, that name would fit the stream all right," the sport replied, remembering that the waters of the little mountain brook did ripple over silver sands.

"It is plain, then, that we must look for the Irishman somewhere between Painted City and that point."

"I reckon I can get you nearer to the ground than that," Blake observed, after thinking the matter over a moment.

Then he described the wooded prairie where he had encountered the road-agents.

"That is known as Scrub Oak Prairie," said the rancher.

"And it is about six miles from the creek?" the sport suggested.

"Yes, five or six."

"It is evident that your man on the horse did not reach that point, or he would have been stopped by the fellows who went for me," Blake observed. "If they had got away with the Irishman they would never have made the mistake of thinking I was you when I came along."

"That is so. They would have spotted the horse, sure!" Tompkins declared.

"You must look for your Irishman somewhere between the prairie and the creek."

"Yes; much obliged."

"Don't mention it," responded the sport, politely, and then the three rode away.

Blake watched them until they had got well out of the town, and then he heaved a deep sigh.

"Confound the luck!" he grumbled. "Wouldn't I like to be with those fellows, riding away from this miserable camp!"

"Ah, my friend Sandy was right, I reckon, a graveyard is a fool to this place for liveliness."

Then the sport happened to notice Dutch Jake, the proprietor of the hotel, looking out of the door.

"That is a jolly-looking old fellow," the sharp mused. "It would not be a bad idea for me to have a little talk with him about how things are running in the town."

"He will be apt to know what the chances are for my getting a job in the mines."

Then a customer entered the saloon and the landlord retired from the door, in order to serve him.

When Blake entered the place the Dutchman and the miner were apparently having a private conversation, and so the sport took up a newspaper and sat down in a corner of the room.

The one customer was succeeded by another, a big, burly, overgrown fellow, roughly dressed, with a fierce-looking red face, fringed by a bushy black beard, and crowned by an uncouth shock of bristle-like hair.

The fellow was armed to the teeth, and came swaggering into the saloon with an air which seemed to intimate that he had the best possible opinion of himself.

Blake watched him from out of the corner of his eyes.

He guessed the breed to which the new-comer belonged in an instant.

The big stranger was one of the "bad men," of the town, the fellows who believed they were "holy terrors."

"And to think that a big, overgrown beast like this galoot hasn't the sand to put up his money and lose it like a gentleman!" Blake muttered to himself in deep disgust.

The big man swaggered up to the counter and nodded to the host.

"How do you find yourself to-day, Dutchy?" he inquired in an arrogant and decidedly offensive way.

"Oh, I vas pretty vell, mine tear fr'en'; how you find your seluf dis beautiful day?" replied the landlord speaking with a strong foreign accent, and as he spoke he rubbed his hands together nervously, by his manner plainly indicating that he stood in great dread of his fierce-looking, loud-talking visitor.

"Now here is a fine chance for a little fun if I choose to take a hand in the game," the sport remarked, under his breath.

"If there was only a little money in it, how quickly I would hop in and show this big galoot that the race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the overgrown mass of fat, bone and blubber who swaggers around a town trying to scare people into the belief that he is old Captain Death in person."

"I'm so-so," the big fellow replied. "Able to be up and take my bug-juice reg'larly, and, speaking of bug-juice, s'pose you waltz yer best whisky over this way so I kin take 'bout five fingers to wash the dust outen my throat."

"Wow! I'm as dry as if I had swallowed an ash barrel!"

"Oh, yesh, yesh, I would be glad to sell you der stuff, but mine tear fr'en', hafe you got der coin?" the host asked in an extremely soothing way.

"Coin!" yelled the brawny stranger, and he brought his fist down upon the counter with a terrific bang, causing the fat Dutchman to jump nervously to one side.

"W'ot do you mean by talking to me bout coin, you miserable no-souled, white-livered skunk of a Dutch p'isoner?"

The host cowed before the threatening look of the big fellow and began to rub his hands together nervously again.

"I vas shust asking der question, dot vas all!" he stammered.



"W'ot does it matter whether I have got the coin or not?" the arrogant stranger demanded. "Isn't my face good for a drink?"

"Oh, yas, yas, of course, mine fr'en'," and the saloon-keeper hastened to place the bottle upon the counter, hoping to thus allay the storm which his uncautious utterance had raised.

But as the fellow had evidently got just enough liquor on board to make him ugly he was not inclined to be easily pacified.

"Darn yer yeller Dutch skin!" he cried. "I reckon it has been a heap years since I have been so insulted, and it knocks me all into a heap too, for to have you go for me in any sich ornery way arter all the money I have spent in your saloon!"

"By the toe-nails of the great grizzly b'ar I sw'ar I have laid men out, fit for plantin', for a mighty sight less thing than this hyer that you jest flung at me!"

"My tear fr'en', take a drink mit me und say no more about it," replied the Dutchman, evidently very much terrified, and he pushed the bottle and a glass over toward the ruffian.

"Wal, I dunno whether I will or not!" the big fellow roared, causing the fat host to jump in alarm.

"Darn me if I ain't a good mind to never come into this hyer shebang again!" he continued. "But I reckon that if I conclude for to play the game in that way I would have to kill a Dutchman about your size first!"

The host trembled at the threat and it was as much as the Fresh could do to keep quiet.

It was his nature to thrust himself forward and take part in any affair of this kind, and the fact that it did not possibly concern him in any way was not of the slightest consequence.

But in the present instance Blake managed to keep from interfering because the idea had come to him that he might in some way be able to turn the affair to his advantage.

If he had been in good trim, with his weapons handy, and money in his pocket, such a consideration would not have had the slightest weight with him; but, as it was, he forced himself to remain silent.

"Ah, my tear sir, you hafe not a better fr'en' in der camp than I vas!" the Dutchman protested.

"Hafe I not always been villing to gifes you der best in der house? Ish dere not on der slate now more ash ten tollars against your name?"

"W'ot of it—w'ot of that?" the big fellow demanded, fiercely. "Ain't I good for it—good for every durned red cent of it, you blasted old sassage-bag?"

"Oh, yesh, yesh, of course, I vas not saying dot you vasn't!" the frightened saloon-keeper answered.

"Wal, I reckon you had better not say anything of the kind, 'cos if you did thar would be a dead Dutchman round hyer in 'bout two minutes arterwards!" the ruffian declared, with so ferocious a scowl that it fairly made the fat host shiver.

"Oh, dot vas all right," the saloon-keeper responded, endeavoring to smile and look cheerful, but the attempt was a complete failure.

"I would not do anything to hurt der feelings of a goot customer like yourself for the vorl!"

"Am I not always glad to see you come into mine place? Do I not always tell der boys dot you are one of the best mans in der camp? You can bet high on dot, every time!"

"Wal, I dunno 'bout dot!" the ruffian replied, with a dubious shake of his big head.

"You see, I am kinder afeard that you are a two-faced galoot, and don't mean w'ot you say. You talk all right to my face—g'in me all sorts of taffy, and then make faces at me ahind my back."

"Oh, mine gracious! did anybody ever hear such things as dot?" the fat saloon-keeper exclaimed, elevating his hands, as if to call Heaven to witness that he would not possibly do anything of the kind.

"Tain't so, then?"

"So help me gracious, I wish I may die if I don't always say dot you are one of the finest gentlemen in der town."

"Wal, you kin bet yer life that thar ain't no flies on me!" the big fellow declared, boastfully.

"I'm Big Ben, I am, the Baby Elephant from White Oaks! the tough cuss from Toughcussville, and the man who dares to look crooked at me, had better pick out his coffin and git the grave-diggers ready!"

"Yesh, yesh, I know dot, Mister Big Ben!" the saloon-keeper declared, with a solemn wag of his head.

"Dere ish no mans in dis town v'ot has any business mit you."

"You bet!"

And then, pretending to be satisfied that the saloon-keeper meant no offense, the rough fellow took a big drink of whisky, smacked his lips, told the Dutchman to "hang it up with the rest," and then stalked out of the saloon.

Blake was on his feet in an instant; his opportunity had come!

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE SPORT'S SPECULATION.

THE Dutchman, with a groan of disgust, was adding the cost of the ruffian's last drink to a

long list of figures under his name on the slate, when Blake came up to the counter.

"Say, old man, are you in the habit of standing this sort of thing?" he demanded.

"V'at ish dot?" asked the saloon-keeper, glancing in a suspicious way at the stranger.

"I asked if you was in the habit of allowing a big ruffian to come into your place, get his liquor and clear out without putting up his coin?"

"V'at can I do?" the old Dutchman asked, in a helpless way.

"What can you do? Why, take a club and lay him out—you are surely big and strong enough," the sport replied, surveying the stalwart proportions of Dutch Jake with interest.

"Oh, mine gootness, my tear fr'en', I would not dare to do dot!" the saloon-keeper declared.

"I hafe a club here," and he displayed a monstrous weapon, "vitch I use on some of der boys when dey comes mine place into to kick up a row, but I would not dare to lift mine hand to fight mit der Baby Elephant, for he would gifes me mine walking-ticket to de odder world shust so sure as you are born!"

"Bosh!" ejaculated the sport, in a tone of supreme contempt, much to the surprise of the saloon-keeper.

"V'at ish dat?" the Dutchman exclaimed.

"Vhy do you say bosh, and curl your nose up to der ceiling?"

"Because I don't take any stock in this big bully."

"He ish a bad mans!"

"Yes, with his mouth."

"He has killed more men dan he hash got fingers and toes."

"In his mind!" the sport retorted. "You don't really mean to tell me now that you believe all his yarns about what a terror he is?"

"I know he ish a bad mans—one of der baddest mans in der camp!" the old Dutchman replied, impressively. "All der boys in der town are afraid of him."

"That is because he is a great bag of wind, and they make the mistake of thinking he amounts to something because he boasts so much of what he can do, but I reckon that if any good man went in just to see how much sand he had, the discovery would be made that he isn't anything but a gas-bag."

"Maybe, mine frien', you are anxious for to try der cap on," the old saloon-keeper suggested in an extremely sarcastic way.

"It ish all very vell for to say somethings, but maybe you are one of der kinds of mans who likes to do der talking better dan der acting."

"Dutchy, it isn't a man about my size that the fellow is robbing, but you; and you can bet your bottom dollar that if I was in your place I would not stand it."

"Oh, that ish all very vell to say, my dear frien', but if you ran dis place, I bet me two tollars and a half you would not do any better ash myseluf!" the old fellow responded.

"How much has the fellow stuck you for—ten and a half?" the sport asked, glancing at the figures on the slate which Dutch Jake had just footed up.

"Yesh, ten tollars und a half, und I vill never get a cent of it, you bet your life, ain't it?"

"How much will you give me if I collect the bill?" Blake asked, in a brisk, business-like way.

The old Dutchman stared.

"V'at ish dot?"

"Oh, I mean what I say; I am not talking merely for the sake of hearing the sound of my voice. I am just old business from the word go!" the sport declared.

The saloon-keeper shook his head as though he did not know what to make of the matter.

"You see, I am a stranger here, and as business is so dreadful dull in the town I am rather at a loss to know what to do, so I am open to take any job where there is a show to make any money."

"Yesh, yesh, dot ish all right, but you vill not get any money out of der Baby Elephant!" the old fellow declared in the most positive manner.

"Now don't you be too sure about that," Blake responded.

"You have no idea what a persuasive chap I am until you see me at work," Blake declared.

"Dot may be so," the saloon-keeper responded with a doubtful shake of his big head.

"But I can tell you, mine tear frien', dot you might as well hope to talk der cash out of der side of dis house as to get der Baby Elephant to hand over der shekels!"

"Oh, you are away off your base!" Blake responded. "You see you have not been introduced to me yet and you can't form any idea of what kind of a man I am until you get well acquainted with me."

The old Dutchman shrugged his shoulders and elevated his eyebrows.

"I know der Baby Elephant und you don't!" he declared. "Und I tells you w'ot it ish, mine frien', if you are anxious to leave dis world shust as soon as you can, den you better try it on mit Big Ben."

"Talking will not settle the matter!" the sport replied. "I am here for business. How much of this claim will you give me if I collect it?"

"My tear frien', you must not do it—you vill be smashed."

"That is all right—I like to be smashed!" Blake replied, briskly, much to the surprise of the saloon-keeper.

"Come now—right down, old business! We will let the big galoot off for an even ten if he will pony up—is that right?"

"Oh, yesh, yesh! I will be glad to take der ten!"

"How much for me? five?"

"Yesh, mine gootness, yesh! five for you, but mine tear fr'en' you vill never get it!"

"Never you mind about that," the sport replied. "If I don't get it you will not have to pay it, and so you will be so much in pocket," and Blake smiled blandly in the face of the Dutchman as he made the remark.

The saloon-keeper scratched his head for a moment.

"Mine gracious! I do not see how dot vas," he said. "But I s'pose it is all right."

"Oh, yes, all right and tight. Now this is all understood; if I collect the ten dollars, five of it is to come to me."

"Yesh, I s'pose so," the saloon-keeper responded slowly, for the idea had suddenly come to him that he was giving an enormous percentage to the collector.

"You suppose so?" Blake exclaimed. "Don't you know that it is so? I want to have this matter clearly understood before I commence operations."

The saloon-keeper was a Dutch Jew, and true to the traditions of his race, the moment he got the idea into his mind that there was a possibility of the sport collecting the debt, which he had given up as lost, the thought came to him that he was paying entirely too much to the sport.

"Vell, vell, I s'pose it ish all right," he remarked, shaking his head in a way to clearly indicate that he did not consider that it was.

"But my tear fr'en', ish not fifty per cent. a pretty big price?"

"That is the best I will do!" Blake responded, firmly. "I must have five dollars or else I will not go into the speculation."

"If I collect the money you will be five in, if I don't you are out ten, so you can take your choice."

The saloon-keeper was not so dull as to fail to comprehend that the sport meant what he said, so he hastened to agree.

"Oh, it ish all right. It is a bargain!" he declared. "I will gife you five if you collect der ten."

"All right; watch me try for it!" and the sport went to the door of the saloon.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### AN ASTONISHED MAN.

WHEN the sharp looked through the door he discovered that the big fellow had only gone down the street about fifty feet and halted there to exchange a few words with three of the townsmen.

The Baby Elephant happened to look around just as Blake came to the door, and so the sport had a chance to attract his attention.

"Hey, you, playful elephant! come here, I want to talk to you!" Blake exclaimed.

Now there wasn't anything particularly offensive in the words, nor really in the manner, for the sport was obliged to shout in order to make the other hear him, but in spite of this the wrath of the big fellow was at once excited.

He scowled in an angry way at the sport, and then addressing his companions said:

"Say, boyees, who is this durned fresh galoot?"

The miners took a look at the sport and replied that they didn't know.

They "reckoned" he must be a stranger for none of them had ever seen him before.

"Mighty free and easy he is with his putting handles on people!" the big ruffian growled.

"He called you a playful elephant," observed one of the men, really chuckling in his sleeve at the boldness of the stranger.

"I reckon he don't know you, Ben, or else he wouldn't try no joke of that kind on you," remarked a second, who had come to the conclusion that there was a chance for a fight, and was disposed to do all in his power to bring about such a delightful conclusion.

"Durn him for a loud-mouthed galoot!" the Baby Elephant exclaimed, "I will soon show him in sh rt order that he has got the wrong pig by the ear if he attempts to try any funny business with me."

"Wal, now, you kin jest swoller me hull if I don't believe that chap will give you a mighty good fight, Ben!" cried the third one of the three, who did not think so at all, and merely made the remark with the idea of exciting the bully to attack the unknown.

"That feller stand up ag'in me!" the big fellow cried in supreme contempt. "That lanky, pipe-stem galoot? W'iv. boys, if he looks sideways at me I will lay him across my knee and break him in two!"

"Good for you, Ben!" cried the first miner. "You are just the boy who kin do it, you bet!"

"Don't take any yawp out of him, Ben!" cried the second man. "Jest wade right in and smash him for keeps!"



"But you might as well keep yer eyes peeled until you find out jest what kind of a critter he is," the third fellow cautioned.

"I don't know the man, but from his looks I should reckon he might turn out to be a pretty tough fighter."

The fellow was doing all he could to egg the bully on, for he did not believe what he said.

"Wal, all I've got to say is that I don't reckon you are any judge if you think that galoot stands any show with me!" the big fellow exclaimed.

"Jest you come along, boys, and in about two shakes of a mule's tail I will show this cuss jest what kind of a playful elephant I am, gol-durn his impudence!"

Blake kept his eyes upon the group while this conversation had been going on, and being a good judge of mankind, had no difficulty in guessing what had been said.

He laughed quietly to himself as he retreated into the saloon when he saw the big fellow start for the door.

"I reckoned that my calling him a playful elephant would be apt to get his mad up," the sport soliloquized.

The landlord had been able by means of the window to keep his eyes on the bully, and when he saw him start for the saloon the Dutchman became decidedly nervous.

"Mine gootness!" he cried, actually turning pale, while his knees trembled. "Dot mans is coming here, und it is look like he vas mad all through."

"He will be a great deal madder before I get through with him!" Blake declared.

"Now, gentle Dutchman, you understand that this isn't any of your funeral? You just lay low and keep quiet. Let me do the talking, and don't you put your oar in."

"You bet your life pooty quick I won't! V'at you take me for?" the old Dutchman asked. "I vas not a lunatic asylum!"

By this time the bully had reached the door.

Blake was leaning against the counter, apparently in the most careless of attitudes, but any man who was a judge of boxing would readily have seen that he was standing in such a way that a single movement would enable him to assume an offensive motion.

The big fellow stalked into the room, halted when he reached the center of it, and surveyed the sport with a glance full of angry contempt.

From head to foot he measured the sport with his eyes, and then gave an indignant sniff.

The three miners crowded in the doorway, eager to see the fun.

"Say! are you the galoot w'ot howled at me?" the big fellow demanded.

"I reckon it was a man about my size," the sport replied.

"W'ot you mean? Whar was you raised? Who fotched you up, anyhow, not to larn you better manners than to call a gen'leman out of his name?"

"Ain't you the playful elephant?" Blake demanded.

"Playful elephant to blazes!" the other retorted, in wrath. "If you know anything 'bout me, you know durned well that that ain't my name!"

"Well, as far as that goes, it is neither here nor there," the sport remarked, in an off-hand way. "I didn't call you in here to discuss your name, but to get you to fix up a little business-matter."

"Business matter!" cried the bully, taken completely by surprise, and staring at the sport in amazement.

"That is what I said!" responded Blake, briskly. "Don't you understand good United States talk? I spoke plainly enough, and if you have any sense at all in your thick head, you ought to comprehend what I mean!"

This speech caused the bully to stare open-mouthed in astonishment. He could hardly believe that he had heard aright.

During all the time that he had dwelt in the camp, no one had dared to talk to him in any such outrageous manner.

And as for the miners and the landlord, they were filled with amazement, and gazed in a helpless sort-of-way at the pair.

Then an idea occurred to the bully.

The bold speaker was a stranger; he was not acquainted with the men of the camp, and perhaps some joker, for the fun of the thing, had put him up to this line of conduct.

So, with a great effort, the big fellow resisted the desire which he had to take the impudent fellow by the neck and make him play a tattoo upon the floor with his heels.

He wanted to find out who the joker was, that he might be able to call him to an account for his share in the thing.

"Stranger, it is mighty plain that you don't know who I am, or else you wouldn't never dare to talk in no sich way as this to me!" the bully declared.

"Oh, come now! don't run away with any mistake of that kind. I know who you are well enough!"

"You do?"

"You bet I do."

"I'm the Baby Elephant."

"Exactly, and a perfect beast you are, too, I should say!"

This attack made the bully gasp in amazement, and the lookers-on grew more and more surprised.

"Stranger, you must be crazy to say sich things to me," the ruffian declared, so decidedly perplexed by this unexpected attack that his wonder was greater than his rage.

"Oh, no, I am not!" Blake replied. "Although I am a stranger in the town, I know you as well as though I had lived here for a year."

"I know the class to which you belong—you are one of the bad-man tribe, fellows who go around boasting of what terrible fighters they are, and all that sort of thing, and in a great many cases they scare men, who don't know any better, into thinking that they really do amount to something, but I am not one of that class, you see, and so I don't take a bit of stock in any of these ghost stories."

"Then you know that I am Big Ben, the Baby Elephant, and that folks say I am one of the worst men in this hyer section?" the fellow declared, his chest swelling with conscious pride.

"Oh, yes, I know all about that; but, as I said before, I don't take any stock in fairy tales."

"Wal, stranger, I am jest as squar' a man as you kin scare up in these diggings, and I didn't want to take no advantage of you!" the bully announced. "I didn't want to sail in and smash you without giving good, fair warning of jest w'ot a 'tarnal airtquake of a cuss I am; but, since you understood all about it, I s'pose I may as well go in to wipe the floor up with you." And the big fellow began to swing his brawny fists clumsily in the air.

"Hold on a moment!" Blake exclaimed. "Before we do any fighting, there is a little matter to which I want to call your attention."

"Hey?" exclaimed the Baby Elephant, in surprise.

"You owe a bar-bill here of ten dollars and a half, and I want to know what you intend to do about it."

"W'ot in thunder is it to you?" the other demanded, in surprise.

"You owe me now and not Dutchy here," Blake explained. "I have taken the matter out of his hands, so you can settle with me, and you had better hand the money over before we sail in for war, for if I should lay you out, then I would have to go through your pockets, and that is something I had rather not do."

"You durned whipper-snapper! you won't lay me out!" the bully howled, in a great rage.

"Never mind arguing the point!" the sport exclaimed. "We could discuss the matter all day and never be able to settle it as conclusively as we can after hammering each other for a few rounds, but I want this money question disposed of first."

"I am willing to do the fair thing, and so I will throw off the half-dollar and make it an even ten."

"Go down in your clothes, now, and fetch me up a saw-buck as soon as you can," the sport added, in an encouraging way.

"Not by a durned sight!" the big fellow growled. "W'ot do you take me fer? Do you think I am going to shell out my wealth jest 'cos the fu'st big-mouthed stranger w'ot comes along takes it into his head to ax fer it?"

"Oh, you are not worth ten, then!" exclaimed Blake, in a sarcastic way.

"Yes, I am, durn you!" the other exclaimed, hotly, falling at once into the trap which the sport had set for him.

Blake wanted to find out whether the man had money enough to pay the bill. If he had not "the wherewithal," the sport had made up his mind to levy on his weapons, for in Blake's present condition, all was fish that came to his net.

"You have got the ten then?"

"You bet I have, but you won't git it!" the bully retorted, defiantly.

"Have to take it out of your hide, eh?"

This suggestion fearfully enraged the Baby Elephant.

He spit on his hands and then struck a fighting attitude.

"You slab-sided, lantern-jawed tenderfoot, I'm going to everlastingly warm you!" he howled.

"Are you all ready?" asked Blake, straightening up and bringing his fists to the level of his waist.

"Yes sir-ee! you bet I am ready!"

"How are we going to have it?" the sport asked in as easy and careless a manner as though he was speaking of a dinner party.

"Have it—have w'ot?" questioned the Baby Elephant.

"Why our little picnic, of course; what rules, London prize ring, Marquis of Queensberry, or a good, old-fashion rough-and-tumble."

"Oh, darn yer fancy gimcrack rules! rough-and-tumble is good enough for me!" the big fellow cried.

"All right! I am agreeable. Anything to be accommodating!" the sharp declared.

"You jest wait till you git in to my grip and if

you don't think that some darned old grizzly b'ar has got his paws on you, then I don't know w'ot I am a-talking 'bout."

"Well, I don't believe you do, for a cent!" Blake retorted.

"Are you ready?" the sport demanded.

"You bet!"

"Let her go, Gallagher!"

The big fellow squared off at his opponent in a clumsy fashion.

Hardly had he begun to brandish his huge fists in the air when with a motion so quick that it amazed the bystanders the right arm of Blake shot out as straight as a die, and the iron-like fist landed on the left jaw of the Baby Elephant, right under the ear.

The force of the blow spun the bully around, and then Blake gave him the left fist in the nape of the neck, tumbling Big Ben to the ground.

Down he went sprawling on the floor like a huge frog, to the great wonderment of all the bystanders, who did not know what to make of this unexpected display of strength and science.

None of them had ever seen anything of the sort before.

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### A MORTAL INSULT.

THE big fellow was half-stunned by the blows and the fact that his senses were muddled by liquor added to his confusion.

As the man lay sprawling upon the floor an idea came into the head of the Fresh, who was nothing if not odd and eccentric.

He seized the bully by the feet and commenced to shove him to the door.

Dazed by the blows he had received, and hardly knowing what he was doing, the bully put out his hands in order to save his face, and the sport, thus turning him into a wheelbarrow, propelled him into the street amid roars of laughter from the lookers-on, who thought the performance an extremely comical one.

After he had got the man into the street, Blake let go of him and hastened back into the saloon.

"Give me a revolver, quick!" he exclaimed to the Dutchman, whose face was still widened by the broad grin produced by the discomfiture of the Baby Elephant.

Blake had lived too long in the West not to understand that a big revolver, loaded, ready for action is one of the necessary articles to be found in all well-regulated saloons.

The Dutchman was so impressed by the commanding tone of the sport that he took a revolver from under the counter and handed it over without a word.

Blake examined the weapon hastily.

It was a double-acting tool, a self-cocker, and every chamber of the cylinder had a cartridge in it.

"How is she—a pretty good tool?" the sport asked, rapidly.

"She vas a beautiful pistol!" the saloon-keeper replied. "I gave a man who was strapped ten dollars for her and he said she cost him twenty."

"I want to be prepared for emergencies!" the sharp explained.

"This big chunk of wind may suddenly make up his mind that he has got all he wants of nature's weapons and go for me with a pistol, so I want to be prepared."

And as he spoke Blake thrust the revolver in the waistband of his pantaloons at the back, facing around as he did so, prepared to meet the foe.

The securing of the revolver was done so quickly that only the saloon-keeper knew of the occurrence.

The miners had retreated from the doorway into the street when the sport turned the bully into a wheelbarrow, and outside their attention was directed to the Baby Elephant, who slowly assumed an upright posture, relieving his feelings by using the most dreadful language. Soon he came marching into the saloon, while the miners again filled up the doorway, but the three had increased to about a dozen, for all the loungers in the street had been attracted by the violent language of the bully.

Blake's face was to the big fellow as he entered, so the Baby Elephant had no idea that the sport had secured a weapon.

As the sport wore no belt around his waist, contrary to the common custom, it was natural for any one to conclude that he was not armed.

But the bully was not disposed to fall back upon his weapons just yet.

He had not experience enough as a fighter to understand that he was no match for the sport.

Of course he was conscious that he had got the worst of the fight, but was decidedly puzzled to account for it, for as he had never met, or even seen, a scientific fighter in his life, he could not comprehend that though he appeared to have the advantage of his opponent in every way, yet, in reality it was not so, for the trifling extra weight which he possessed was much more than counterbalanced by the fact that it was composed principally of worse than useless fat.

The big fellow had no idea of resorting to



weapons yet a while, for he had not come to the conclusion that he stood no chance with his foe.

His impression was that the two blows were purely accidental ones, and though he was very much amazed by the force with which his antagonist could hit, yet he fancied the strokes were not to be compared with the ones he could give.

It was his idea that if he could get one good blow at the impudent stranger it would take all the fight out of him, or if he could succeed in closing with him, so he could give the stranger a bar-bug, as he termed it, the fight would come to a speedy termination.

"The Baby Elephant was in a very ugly state of mind when he faced Blake for a second time.

"Durned if I was ever so insulted afore since I was hatched!" he cried, his voice fairly trembling with rage.

"I have had plenty of scraps in my time—have run up ag'in' galoots who have called me everything they could lay their tongues to, but no man ever dared to turn me into a durned wheelbarrow afore!" the big fellow continued with a fine burst of indignation.

The crowd in the doorway could not repress their laughter at this declaration, much as they stood in awe of the big fellow.

"Oh, that is all right!" the Baby Elephant cried with a regular snort of rage.

"You fellers can haw-haw all you like same as a lot of jackasses, but you kin bet yer life I am going to git satisfaction!"

Then he turned to the sport and shook his fist in a menacing way.

"I was-a-going to let you off easy!" he declared. "I am a pretty decent sort of a galoot, if you don't comb my ha'r the wrong way, but when any man goes for to turn me into a wheelbarrow, then I am mad all the way through!"

"It was rough, I suppose, but, really, that is about all you are fit for," the sport replied.

"All I am fit for?" the bully gasped, in amazement.

"Yes, as a wheelbarrow you might be of some use, but as a man you are a total and complete failure, no good to yourself or to anybody else. I want that ten dollars, all the same, though," the sharp added.

A malignant grin came over the face of the big ruffian.

"Will you take it now or wait until you get it?" he cried, insolently.

"Oh, I will get it fast enough!" Blake retorted. "I am not worrying at all about that.

"But if you are wise you will hand it over and save yourself trouble."

"Trouble!" exclaimed the Baby Elephant.

"That is what I said. I have just been playing with you, you know, but now I am going right in for business, and if you have the sand to stand up to the rack, and take your medicine like a man, inside of about ten minutes, you will not be as good-looking as you are now, but you will have a heap more sense."

The bystanders looked at each other in wonder. If the stranger had only been playing with the Baby Elephant what would he do when he settled down to business, and proceeded to get his "fine work" in.

"Oh, you may think that you are mighty smart with your jumping-jack tricks but I am onto you now!" the big fellow declared, and as he finished the speech he made a sudden rush at the sport.

But the latter was not taken by surprise.

Like the practiced swordsman he had been watching his opponent's eyes, and so was able to detect that the attack was coming before it was made.

The sport did not give an inch, but, bracing himself, met the rush with a straight "right-hander" which took the bully between the eyes and made him see more stars than he had ever gazed upon in the heavens.

The force of the terrific blow not only stopped the onward movement of the Baby Elephant but sent him reeling backward.

The force of the blow was nearly doubled by the fact that the big fellow was rushing onward like a mad bull when he got the stroke, his idea being to bear the other down by the force of his weight.

Blake was quick to improve the advantage which he had secured.

His opponent was already in "Queer street," as the sporting men say, and the game was in the hands of the sharp.

He followed the Baby Elephant up, "measured" his man and sent in a terrific left-hander which took the big fellow just over the heart.

With a howl of pain and rage combined the bully went to the floor.

To a gross, stout fellow, fat as a hog, to use the common expression, such a blow in the "bread-basket" was about the most damaging that could be given, and the Baby Elephant lay like a log for a few moments.

In fact, he was practically "knocked out."

The lookers-on could not help giving a yell of delight as a token that they appreciated the "show" when the master-stroke was given.

"Gee-whitaker! what a lick!" the foremost man in the doorway exclaimed, and the rest too gave audible evidence of their admiration.

Blake retreated to the bar, and resting his elbows on it waited for his adversary to recover.

"This was understood to be a rough and tumble, and everything goes," he remarked in his quiet way, apparently not at all affected by the exertions he had made.

"I did not interpose any objections when my pard on the floor there wanted it that way, but for all that, it is a game I despise, and I don't care to go into it.

"Of course the fight is mine if I choose to take advantage of the lead which I have got, but I don't," the sport added.

"I am going to give my friend in the boots there time to get all right again, and then if he isn't satisfied with what he has already received there is plenty more in the same shop."

A hum of approval came from the miners at this announcement, and one of them took it upon himself to express his opinion in regard to the matter.

"Stranger, you are giving Big Ben the squarest kind of a deal, and no mistake!" he declared.

"And if he ain't satisfied with the lay-out, then he is the biggest kind of a hog, and there ain't no two ways 'bout it!"

"That's so! sure as ye'r born!" three or four of the spectators cried in chorus.

In a couple of minutes the Baby Elephant recovered sufficiently to sit up, and he gazed with a puzzled expression on his face at the sport.

"Really, you know, you have been knocked out," Blake remarked.

"But as I want you to be satisfied I am willing to keep on hammering you as long as you care to stand up."

A snicker came from the bystanders at this declaration.

The big fellow slowly got on his legs.

"Say! I reckon you think I'm the biggest kind of a fool, don't you?" he demanded.

"Well, I can't say that I believe you have got much sense," the sharp responded, frankly.

"Mebbe I don't know enough to go in when it rains, but I will be blamed if I ain't got too much sense to let you pound me any more!" the Baby Elephant declared. "I'm out of this game for good, and you don't git no more chance at me."

#### CHAPTER XV.

##### A SETTLEMENT.

THE miners were rather astonished at this, for the bully was known to be a game man, and although there wasn't a doubt that he had been roughly handled, yet it was a matter of amazement to the bystanders that he should not be willing to go on with the contest.

The only blow which had apparently done any damage was the one between the eyes; the effects of this were plainly visible, but it was the blow over the heart which had made the big fellow sick of the job he had undertaken.

Of course he was not going to admit to the crowd that the terrible blow had taken all the steel out of him—that the moment after he received the awful stroke, a sudden faintness had come over him which, at the time, suggested to him that his last hour had come; this gave him the impression that if he attempted to renew the battle, another blow or two in the same region would surely end his earthly career.

"You are fully satisfied?" Blake asked.

"Yes, I've got enuff," the bully growled. "I ain't feeling very well to-day, anyhow," he added.

"The trouble is that you did not get a good ready on," the sport replied.

"How?" exclaimed Big Ben, too dull to understand that the sport was quizzing him.

"You did not go at it the right way. You ought to have gone in and trained for awhile—a year or two—and then you might have been able to do something," the sport explained.

The big fellow scowled, and the bystanders laughed.

"I s'pose you think you are blamed funny?" he grumbled. "But I want you to understand that this ere thing ain't ended it atween us!"

"Yes, I comprehend; this is the first heat, so to speak, and you want me to understand that one heat don't make a rose."

"You bet it don't!"

"When will we go at it again?"

"When I get good and ready," Big Ben replied in a sulky way.

"Ah, that is just it!" the sport exclaimed.

"That is what I suggested to you. You wasn't good and ready this time, and that is the reason you came out of the little end of the horn."

"Oh, you kin crow now all you like, but my time will come," the big fellow declared, in a threatening way.

"Ah, yes, there is an old saying that every dog has his day; but, I say, touching that little ten dollars?" the sport questioned.

"Durned if I don't think it's kinder rough!" the ruffian declared. "Fu'st you pound a man, and then you go fer his ducats."

"You blamed blockhead! if it had not been for the ducats, do you think I would have taken the trouble to hammer you?" Blake replied.

"Why, I wouldn't have wasted my time."

"Come, now! hand out the money, and be quick about it, too; I don't want to wait all day for it."

The Baby Elephant glared at the sport as though he meditated renewing the attack, and Blake rested his right hand on his hip, a careless movement, apparently, but it was done so that he might be in readiness to draw his revolver.

From the look on the bully's face, it appeared as though he had an idea of using his weapons, and the sport was certain that the big fellow would try to take him unawares this time, for his experience had satisfied him that he stood no chance with the sport when it came to a game of fisticuffs.

And Big Ben was so enraged at his shameful defeat, that he had a good mind to draw his revolver and see if he could not make out better in a second attack than he had done in the first, but there was a dull pain in the region of his heart which seemed to take all the steel out of him, and then, too, the thought came to him that if he could not succeed in getting "the drop" on the sport, he did not stand much chance to get the best of the fight.

His opponent was wonderfully quick—he had discovered that already to his cost—and though no arms were visible upon his person, yet the big fellow felt convinced that the sport was armed, and the odds were great, too, that he knew how to handle his tools.

These thoughts surged quickly through the mind of the Baby Elephant as he stood glaring with his eyes full of sullen rage at the sport.

If he had been able to see any chance for success, he would have attacked Blake immediately, but as he didn't, he judged that it would be wise to wait for a more favorable opportunity.

"This hyer is the roughest kind of a deal," the big fellow declared, as he proceeded to pull out his money.

"Of course! comes like pulling teeth, doesn't it?" Blake suggested.

"But it has got to be done, and no two ways about it. I hammered you in order to get the money and now I am going to have it or know the reason why."

Big Ben counted out ten dollars from his "roll" and gave the money to the sport.

"Well, it doesn't break you, does it?" Blake remarked.

"I reckon not!"

"You have about as much more left?"

"W'ot is that to you?" the Baby Elephant exclaimed in a surly way.

"Have you got sand enough to gamble a little?"

"How?" asked the other, surprised.

"I will go you odd or even and put my ten up against your roll!"

The big fellow surveyed the sport, a look full of suspicion on his face and then he shook his head.

"No, sir-ee! Not much I won't!" the big fellow declared, emphatically.

"You want to play some kind of a trick on me—git me into a hole, hey?"

"Ah, you are entirely too suspicious," Blake retorted. "I was only offering you a good, square deal, and if you had any sand you would jump at the chance to get back your ten again."

"Why, it is as fair as fair can be! I will put my money up against yours, slap a quarter on the bar and give you the call. If you say heads, and it is a head, you take the cash; but if it is a tail I corral the ducats!"

For a moment the big fellow was tempted to accept the banter, but the idea came to him that the sport would not have made the offer unless he was sure of winning, and so he shook his head.

"I reckon you can't rope me into no game!" he replied.

"You ain't the kind of man that I want to gamble with, nohow!"

Blake laughed, and the bystanders joined in, much to the disgust of the bully.

"Oh, that is a good way to get out of it!" the sport declared. "Why don't you tell the truth and admit that you have not got the sand to lose your money like a gentleman?"

"I'll see you ag'in, some time," responded the big fellow, putting away his money and starting for the door.

"I'll see you ag'in, and mebbe I will be able to make it warm for you!" he continued.

By this time he was in the doorway, the miners retreating to make room for him; then he turned and shook his clinched fist at the sport.

"I will always be glad to accommodate you, at any time and at any place," Blake responded.

"You'll git yer comb cut afore you are many days older, and then you won't crow so loud!" the Baby Elephant declared, as he took his departure.

"Maybe it will work that way, but I don't reckon it will," Blake observed.

In passing, it is as well to remark that it was wise in the big fellow not to accept the sport's challenge, for he stood no chance of winning.

Blake was a perfect master of the sleight-of-hand art, and when he encountered a ruffian of the Baby Elephant stamp, did not hesitate to get the best of him in the most bare-faced manner.

He justified such conduct by the motto:

"When a man gets among wolves, he must go in to be the biggest wolf of the lot."



And to do the sharp justice, it must be said that he lived up to the saying in the most consistent manner possible.

Perceiving that the fun was over, the most of the bystanders departed, but a few lingered in the room, surveying the sport with curious eyes.

"Mine fr'en', you vas a bully mans!" the old Dutchman declared, highly delighted with the way in which the matter had been settled.

"I hafe seen a goot many fights in mine place, but you are der best mans I ever saw."

"Well, I can generally manage to keep my end up," the sport replied.

Then he laid five dollars on the counter, with the remark:

"Here is your little stake, and if you have any more bad debts that you want collected, I will be glad to take them on the same terms."

"Mine gracious! dot ish not a bad idea!" exclaimed the saloon-keeper.

"Can we make a trade?"

"I think we can, and den dere are three or four of der boys who comes mine place into, and dey make mugs at me, und calls me out of mine name—dey say I am an old bald-headed son-of-a-gun, und I no like it."

"I don't blame you!" Blake responded. "No man likes to be abused, even if he is taking in money from the fellows who are doing the talking."

"Dot vos so," the old Dutchman observed. "I would go for them mit a club und clean them mine place out, but they always comes two or three at a time und I can't handle them pooty quick."

"I tell you what it is, my friend, you want a 'bouncer' here, a man whose business it is to make such fellows behave themselves, and if they don't, to fire them into the street."

"Dot vos it! Dot would be bully!" the saloon-keeper declared.

"Better hire me for your bouncer," Blake suggested. "I will work cheap, and the job will help me to pass my time away."

"I am a sport, you see," he explained. "And I do not, as a rule, do any business in the daytime, and, in fact, not until nine or ten o'clock at night, so I can work the snap without any trouble."

"How mooch will you charge for dot?" inquired the old Dutchman. "I cannot afford to pay mooch, you see, mine frien', for business ish not good."

"Oh, I will make it light for you," the sport replied. "In fact, I don't want any cash at all. You just give me my board and lodging, and I will agree to run every man out of the house who does not behave himself."

The old Dutchman reflected upon this offer for a few moments.

He had been troubled with the rheumatism for a couple of months, so he had not been able to wield his club with his old-time vigor, and some of the rough fellows, having discovered this, made his life miserable with their rude jokes.

"How long am I to pay you, mine frien'?"

"No particular time. I am to have the right to quit if I get tired of the job, and you can end the contract whenever you like, so neither of us will be bound."

"It is a bargain, mine frien'!" the Dutchman exclaimed. "I will engage you as mine bouncer, und I will bet me mine life dot you will be der boss bouncer, too!"

## CHAPTER XVI.

### CALLED TO AN ACCOUNT.

BLAKE laughed.

"Well, I don't know how it will turn out. I have never been a bouncer before, but I will do my best to fill the position to the queen's taste."

"Oh, you vill do it, mine fr'en'!" the saloon-keeper declared in the most confident manner. "Did you not knock der stuffing out of dot Baby Elephant, und he is one of der worst mans in der town?"

"Well, I would not have had such an easy job with him if the fellow had not been as fat as a hog, so that when he got a good, solid poke in the wind it completely upset him."

"Ah, yesh, mine gracious! I would not be willing to have you hit me dot way for a thousand tollars!" the old Dutchman declared.

The two miners, who had remained in the room, and listened to the conversation, grinned at this declaration, although, to tell the truth, if either of them had been questioned regarding the subject, it is doubtful if they would have been willing to stand up before the stranger in battle array for a big sum of money.

One of them at this point happened to glance through the window and made a discovery which he promptly communicated to the others in this wise:

"Hello! hyer comes Tom, the Tinker and Injun Jim! Both of 'em are big friends of yours, ain't they Dutchy?"

And the man grinned as he put the question.

"Mine gootness!" exclaimed the saloon-keeper, angrily, "dot ish not so! Dey are two of der worst mans in der camp. Dot Tinker Tom is der one dot always calls me a bald-headed son-of-gun, und he owes me six tollars too!"

"And Injun Jim has stuck you also, hey?"

"Yesh, four tollars."

"That makes another ten," Blake remarked.

"If the fellows come in I will attend to it, and if you see that there is any danger of their not coming in you had better call them," the sport suggested to the saloon-keeper.

"Yesh, but dere ish two of dem!" the old Dutchman exclaimed.

"Oh, that is all right! I don't mind two—the more the merrier," the sport replied, much to the surprise of his hearers.

"They are coming in, I reckon," the miner remarked, "for they are heading right for the door."

"Mine fr'en', if you are wise I do not think you go for two such bad mans at one time. Better wait until you gets dem alone—one at a time," the old Dutchman suggested.

"Oh, I reckon I might as well put the thing through now as to wait," Blake replied, in his careless way.

"Procrastination is the thief of time." That is a very old saying and a very true one."

The entrance of two men into the saloon at this point ended the conversation.

The pair came swaggering into the apartment as though they were of the opinion that they owned the establishment.

One was a stoutly-built fellow with a stubby beard of sandy hue, roughly dressed and well armed.

The other was a tall, lathy-looking man, with very dark complexion, and his jet-black hair and eyes suggested that he had Indian blood in his veins, so his nickname fitted him much better than such appellations usually do.

The moment he saw the new-comers walk in the impression at once flashed upon the sport that he had seen them before somewhere, and yet he was certain the pair were strangers to him.

He meditated upon the odd circumstance while the pair were walking from the door to the counter, and then an idea suddenly came to him.

The big man was the road-agent who had called himself Captain Blood, and his companion was the man who had kept guard in the road behind him when the outlaws had halted him on the prairie.

Although the men's faces were hidden by masks when they had compelled him to halt, and they were attired in different clothes from those which they now wore, yet the sport was certain he had identified them by their walk.

A feeling of satisfaction took possession of the sport when he made this discovery, and he smiled grimly as he muttered under his breath:

"They had their fun with me on the prairie, and now I will see if I can't have some fun with them here in the town."

"I made up my mind to get even with them, but I hadn't any idea that the opportunity would come along so soon."

"How do you find yourself, you old bald-headed Dutch son-of-a-gun?" Tinker Tom exclaimed, when he arrived in front of the bar, and in order to give due emphasis to the remark he brought his fist down upon the bar with a prodigious whack.

"I vas not a son-of-gun, Tinker Tom!" replied the saloon-keeper. "Nor vas I bald-headed either, and I want you to stop mit such foolness, right now!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed the man, hoarsely, "you are kinder putting on style, ain't you?"

"Heap of style!" exclaimed Injun Jim.

"And it don't become you, old man, either."

"That is so!" Tinker Tom continued. "And you must not try to put on any frills with chaps like us, for we won't have it, you know!" and again he brought his fist down heavily upon the counter.

The Fresh had sauntered to the corner of the room just as the men entered, and happened to turn his back so they could not see his face, therefore, the pair had not taken any particular notice of him, supposing he was one of the loungers often to be found in or around the saloon.

Quite a surprise was it then to the pair when Blake faced around and said:

"It seems to me that you are making altogether too much noise here, and I think you had better stop it right off."

The fellows stared at the speaker for a moment as though he had been a ghost, and Blake saw from the expression upon their faces that they had recognized him.

They did not look at him as they would have gazed at a stranger under similar circumstances, but there was a peculiar expression on their faces which satisfied Blake that he had not made a mistake when he jumped to the conclusion that they were two of the outlaws who had stopped him on the trail.

It was a minute before any reply was made to his speech, and the sport conjectured from the look on the faces of the pair that they were amazed, not so much by the words which he had addressed to them, as by the fact that they did not expect to encounter him, and, possibly too, the change in his personal appearance surprised them.

"Hey? was you a-speaking to us?" the stout fellow asked.

"Yes; there isn't any mistake about that," the sport replied.

"And w'ot was you a-saying?" the man questioned, evidently puzzled by the strange circumstance.

"What is the matter with you?" the Fresh demanded. "Are you hard of hearing that you are not able to understand good United States talk?"

"Oh, no, I reckon that thar ain't either one on as deaf," the stout fellow replied. "But you see we ain't used to hearing any loud talk and it kinder upsets us, you know," and the man winked at the bystanders as he spoke, as though to direct their attention to the fact that he was joking.

"I called you to order right away, for I want you to understand that you have got to behave yourself when you come into this place," the sport warned.

The astonishment which was so plainly visible upon the faces of the two as they listened to this speech was undoubtedly genuine, and they looked at each other, then at the old Dutchman, and ther at the bystanders as though to inquire what it meant.

"Say! who hit you, anyway?" the stout man demanded, after a pause.

"He must have come from some lunatic house," Injun Jim, remarked.

"You will think that somebody hit you, and that a crazy man has got hold of you too, if you don't behave yourself while you are in this saloon!" the Fresh retorted.

"Ah! you are doing a good deal of blowing!" Tinker Tom exclaimed, angrily. "And if you ain't keerful you may be called upon to back up your words!"

"That is just what I am here for, and you will find that I am prepared to make good whatever I may say!" Blake declared.

"W'ot right have you got to interfere anyway?" Tinker Tom demanded.

"Yes, what is it to you whether we talk loud or not?" Injun Jim questioned.

"Oh, I see, you do not understand the position I occupy in this establishment," the sport remarked. "So I suppose I must introduce myself. My name is Blake and I am the bouncer here."

"It is my duty to keep order, and any man who doesn't behave himself I will throw into the street!"

"The blazes you will!" the stout fellow exclaimed, surveying the sport from head to foot as he spoke in a way that strongly suggested that he did not believe the sharp could play any game of that kind on him.

"Yes, sir, that is my little rifle!" Blake responded in a brisk and cheerful way, and if his manner was any indication of his belief the listeners judged that he thought he would not have much difficulty in carrying out the programme.

"The men of this camp must understand that when they come in here they are expected to behave themselves like gentlemen, and if they cannot they will be chucked out upon the street instanter!" the sport continued.

The amazement of the listeners grew apace.

The miners knew that this stranger was a good man, for they had witnessed his easy triumph over the Baby Elephant, who bore a reputation as a "big chief," second to no man in the town, yet for all that they regarded his present action in calling two men to an account as being something bordering on the marvelous.

As for the two fellows to whom he was addressing his conversation they were thoroughly amazed, for the sport did not at all come up to their ideas of a fighting-man, and as they did not know of his encounter with the Baby Elephant they had no notion that he was anything of a warrior.

In fact, they came to the conclusion that this declaration was simply made for the purpose of scaring them, and that he did not mean "business."

The stout man shook his head in an ugly way and exclaimed:

"It is all very well for you to talk 'bout throwing men out on the street, but it is one thing to say it and another thing to do it!"

"Maybe you think that I don't mean what I say," the sport remarked.

"Oh, you may think you kin do it, but when you take the job you will find you have bitten off more than you can chew," Tinker Tom replied.

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating, of course," Blake observed. "And whether I can, or cannot, get my man into the street is something that cannot be discovered until the actual trial is made."

"That is it—that is the p'int, sure as you're alive!" the stout fellow declared.

"Yes, I am willing to admit that," the sport answered. "And I am ready to make the trial too whenever there is a chance for me to do it."

"Now I will tell you in strict confidence that I should be glad to commence with you two, for I owe both of you a grudge!"

## CHAPTER XVII.

### BLAKE ON THE WAR-PATH.

THIS announcement took everybody in the room by surprise.



The bystanders looked upon each other in amazement, and upon the faces of Tinker Tom and Injun Jim there were traces of uneasiness mingled with their astonishment.

"How is that?" the stout fellow asked. "I reckon I don't understand w'ot you are a-driving at."

"None so blind as those who will not see!" the sport declared.

"What has that to do with us?" Injun Jim demanded, an uneasy expression on his dark face.

"You know what I mean well enough."

"Blamed if I do!" Tinker Tom exclaimed.

"How should we know?" his companion asked.

"Oh, you are two innocent ducks!" Blake declared, in a tone full of contempt.

"I reckon we are this time," the stout man replied.

"Considering that you are a galoot whom I never set eyes on afore I don't see how you kin have any grudge ag'in' me."

"And I never saw you anywheres, either!" Injun Jim affirmed.

"And I suppose both of you would be willing to take your oath on that?" the sport exclaimed, sarcastically.

"In course I would!" Tinker Tom replied, promptly.

"Me too!" cried his companion, equally as readily.

"You are banking now on the belief that it cannot be possible for me to know you," the sport observed. "But there is where you are out, for I do know you, despite the fact that the circumstances of our first meeting were such as to make it appear impossible that I would be able to recognize you when I saw you again."

"But I am not going to give the thing away, you know," Blake continued.

"I am a sort of an odd chap, you see, and I always like to settle a thing of this kind myself without calling upon outsiders to come into the ring."

Dark grew the faces of the two as they listened to the words of the sport.

"Oh, I don't know w'ot you are talking 'bout!" Tinker Tom declared. "You have made some mistake, 'cos I never saw you afore."

"No, nor I!" Injun Jim added.

"Oh, no, I have not made any mistake, and you know that I haven't too," Blake retorted.

"I know that all three of us are rigged out in different harness from that we wore when we met before, but that doesn't make any difference," the sport continued. "You know me well enough, and I spotted you two the moment you came into this place by your walk, particularly you, captain; I couldn't make any mistake about you!"

"It is a durned lie!" cried Tinker Tom, angrily. "I never saw you before in my life, and you never saw me, either."

"No, no, you have made some mistake," his companion declared.

"Too thin, boys!" responded the sport. "You can't play any game of the kind on me."

"I know you, and you can just bet all you are worth that I am glad to see you."

"When we met before, you had a decided advantage—in fact, you have a little advantage now, as you are two to one, but I don't mind a little thing like that."

This announcement made the pair stare.

"I have a good memory, you see, and it is a cardinal principle with me to always pay my debts."

"You had me foul the last time we met, and put it to me in a way I despised, and I made up my mind then that I would get square with you on the first occasion that offered, but I hadn't any idea it would come so soon."

"As I said before, there isn't any need of going into any explanations, but I want satisfaction out of you two, and you can bet all you are worth that I am going to have it."

"Say, you must be clean off your nut!" the stout fellow exclaimed. "W'ot chance do you stand ag'in' the two of us?"

"A chance to be struck by lightning, maybe!" the Fresh responded in his light and airy way. "But I am going ahead, all the same!"

"Now, then, the question before the meeting is: how will we get at it?" he continued. "I am anxious for satisfaction, I will admit, but I am not thirsting for the blood of either one of you. I don't care to fix you ready for planting."

"I will be quite satisfied to give the pair of you a good beating."

"Mine gootness!" exclaimed the old Dutchman at this point, unable to longer keep quiet, "one against two! dot ish not right."

"Wal, we ain't a-proposing it," Tinker Tom declared. "We are willing to give this galoot a fair show 'cos we know mighty well that either one of us can give him all he wants."

"I'll tell you how we can fix it!" the sport exclaimed happening to catch sight of three stout sticks which were behind the bar.

These rude canes had been left in the saloon by their owners, and the landlord had put them behind the bar until they should be claimed.

"We will give our weapons to the landlord and arm ourselves with those sticks, and I am to be allowed to wind a blanket on my

left arm for a shield, then I will fight the two of you until you are satisfied, or I am."

This novel proposal gave rise to vast astonishment, and all within the room gazed at the sport with wonder written on their countenances.

They could hardly believe that it could be possible that the stranger would dare to meet the pair with so much advantage on their side.

"You don't mean it?" Tinker Tom declared.

"We will beat you until you are black and blue!" Injun Jim cried with a gleam of delight in his dark eyes.

"Maybe you will, and maybe you won't; that is something we can tell better about when we get at it," the sport declared.

"It is my opinion, you know, that I will have a chance to dust your jackets in the finest possible way, and that is just the snap that I am looking after."

"We will give you the chance just as soon as you like," Tinker Tom declared. "And if we don't take some of the brag and blow out of you before we get through then it will be a wonder!"

"Ah, we will handle you so that you will not do any more bouncing in this saloon for a month of Sundays!" Injun Jim exclaimed.

"If you can do the trick you are quite welcome to work it," the sport responded, evidently not in the least alarmed.

"Mine goot fr'en's!" exclaimed the landlord, an idea having entered his mind which impelled him to speak. "I hope dot you will not hafe der fight in dis place. Dere ish not room here, and you will be sure to break some-tings."

"Oh, we will go out in the street!" the sport replied. "Don't be alarmed for your valuables!"

"Yes, and you will have a heap sight more chance to run away when we make it too warm for you!" Tinker Tom suggested, with an ugly grin.

"After we get at it we will see who will be the first to do the running," the sport rejoined. "I reckon to do a heap of dodging, as there are two of you against me, but that isn't running, you know."

"You will come to the running mighty quick arter we begin, or I have made a big mistake!" the stout man declared.

"Oh, we will warm you!" Injun Jim affirmed, with a grin of delight.

"That is right!" exclaimed Blake, with an approving nod. "Go in and enjoy yourself now all you can, for I reckon that in your case it will be the story of the Irishman and the bull over again."

"How was that?" Tinker Tom asked, while the rest pricked up their ears to listen.

"An Irishman going along a road saw a bull grazing in a field, and the idea came to him that it would be a very funny thing for him to climb over the fence, creep up behind the bull and twist his tail; the more he thought of the scheme, the more funny it appeared to him, and finally he had to lay down on the grass and roar with laughter, so ridiculous it seemed."

"He climbed the fence and cautiously stole up behind the bull, but the animal had his eyes on the Irishman, and the first thing he knew the bull had him on his horns and tossed him over the fence in short order."

"The man picked himself up, sore in every limb, and looked over the fence at the bull, who was challenging him to come on and have some more fun."

"Begorra!" cried the Irishman, "it's a foiner thing that I had my laugh furst!"

There was a chuckle from the lips of the bystanders at the conclusion of the story, but upon the faces of the comrades there was a sneer.

"Wal, we ain't the Irishman no more than you are the bull, by a durned sight!" Tinker Tom declared.

"It is more likely that it is the other way," his companion declared. "If we two can't get away with you, then we are no good!"

"Exactly! there is the point, and you never said a truer word in your life!" the sport declared.

"But we are wasting time! Suppose we give up our weapons and get at it."

"W'ot is the use of that?" the stout fellow asked, suspiciously.

"You are a little dubious about it, eh?" the sport exclaimed with a laugh. "You think there is some trap about the matter and are afraid of getting caught, but you need not worry; everything is fair, and square and above-board."

"My idea of suggesting that we give up our weapons before we go into this thing is so that if any of us get mad we will not be able to go for our shooting-irons; it is to make us live up to our agreement to fight it out with the sticks."

"You need not leave the weapons with Jacob here, if you don't want to. It does not make any difference to me. If you have any friend in the room to whom you prefer to intrust them it is all right as far as I am concerned; I haven't any objection."

"I just as lief let Dutchy take care on 'em," Tinker Tom replied, reassured by this explanation. "I know the old Dutchman is squar'enuff, but I ain't so sure about you," he added grimly.

"After we get through the fight perhaps you will have a better opinion of me," the sport rejoined.

"One thing is certain; it is my intention to make such an impression upon you that a man about your size will not be likely to forget me for many a long day," Blake continued.

The wonderful confidence displayed by the sport astonished the pair, but soon they came to the conclusion that it was the idle boast of a man who was not really conscious of the danger he was about to encounter, and they smiled grimly when they thought of the drubbing they would speedily give the bold stranger.

"Come! out with your weapons and choose your sticks!" Blake exclaimed.

"The exercise will give us a fine appetite for dinner!"

Then Blake set the example by depositing his revolver on the counter; the others did the same with their weapons; each man took a stick; they were so much alike that practically there was no choice, and all marched out into the street.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### A DISCUSSION WITH STICKS.

THERE was a small, single blanket on the shelf behind the counter, a pledge for the repaying of a dollar which the landlord had lent to a seedy miner. The sharp eyes of Blake noticed this article, and that had suggested to him to provide that he should have the use of it as a shield.

So, before proceeding to the street, Blake took the blanket and wound it around his left arm.

The sight of the group coming from the saloon excited immediate attention, and although the street was almost deserted when the men came forth, yet in a couple of minutes quite a little crowd had gathered.

The victory which the stranger had so easily won over the Baby Elephant, had given the gossipers of the town plenty to talk about, and they had not begun to exhaust the subject when the appearance of the three men, armed with the sticks, made them aware that the new-comer had gotten into another row.

The townspeople were astonished. What kind of a man was this stranger-sharp, who seemed to take a delight in getting into difficulties?

"W'ot are the conditions of this hyer fight, anyway?" Tinker Tom asked, as he and Injun Jim turned to face the sport.

"No particular conditions that I know of," Blake replied.

"We are to go at each other until we get enough. I reckon that all three of us have got sense sufficient to sing out when we have got all the stick we want!"

"Wal, I reckon so," Tinker Tom replied, with a grin.

"By the way, there is a little matter that I neglected to speak about," the sport said. "There is a small amount due from each of you to the Dutchman, and I want it understood that if I win this fight that bill has got to be paid."

"Of course!" Tinker Tom exclaimed with a loud laugh. "If you kin succeed in beating us, both Injun and myself will go down in our pockets and haul out our ducats without a word."

"That is satisfactory, and if you beat me you need not pay a cent!" Blake declared.

The old Dutchman shook his head in a solemn way when he heard this declaration.

In his opinion the money was as good as gone already.

The stranger was a good man, but the odds were too great in his opinion.

And this was the general belief, too, notwithstanding the fact that the sport had vanquished Big Ben.

The opponents faced each other, a grin of confidence upon the faces of the comrades, while Blake's countenance wore its usual pleasant smile.

But the reader who has followed the fortunes of the Fresh of 'Frisco through the many tales of which he has been the hero, knows that despite his impulsive rashness, the sharp was a man who calculated every chance and never threw a move away.

In the present instance he felt a great desire to administer the worst kind of a thrashing to the two outlaws who had taken him at such a disadvantage on the prairie, and in choosing the sticks he had displayed rare generalship.

There is an old English game known as "single-stick," and the Fresh, who always made it a point to become an expert in all manly exercises, was a scientific single-stick player.

The blackthorn-stick game, so popular with the stout Irish lads at Donnybrook Fair, is something in the same line, and in the good old days of Donnybrook the blackthorns "twigs" brought many "wigs upon the green."

So, in this case, although it seemed as if the sport was at a terrible disadvantage, yet it really was not so, for he was an expert in the use of the stick, while his antagonists knew nothing whatever about the odd weapons.

Then, too, the Fresh was as light on his feet as a dancing-master, and as quick as an acrobat,



while his antagonists were slow and stiff in their joints.

"Are you ready to git warmed?" Tinker Tom demanded with a grin; already he was enjoying the triumph in anticipation.

"All ready—sail in!"

And then, before either of them could avail themselves of the offer, Blake darted at them.

Astonished and a trifle confused by the unexpected attack, the pair whacked away at the attacker with all their strength.

Blake caught both the blows on his arm, the blanket protecting it from injury, and almost before either of the pair had an idea of what was coming, he dealt Tinker Tom a lick on the head which sent him reeling over backward, then, with wonderful quickness, gave Injun Jim a blow side of the head, just over the ear, turning him half-way around and giving the fellow the impression that about one-half of his head had been knocked off.

After this movement, with a skip and a jump, Blake got behind the fellow and rained blows upon his back until the man howled with pain, dancing up and down, and turning around and around in a vain endeavor to get at his tormentor.

The miners roared with laughter.

Although Injun Jim was in reality getting a most tremendous beating, yet his contortions were ridiculous in the extreme.

Blake, while engaged in punishing the dark-faced ruffian, had not failed to keep an eye on the stout fellow.

It only took about a minute for Tinker Tom to recover from the effects of the blow which had laid him low, and then he rushed at the sport, mad with a desire for revenge.

Blake saw him coming and maneuvered so that his back was to Tinker Tom as he came on.

The stout fellow aimed a terrible blow at Blake's head.

The sport dodged just in time, and Injun Jim, who made a frantic dive at the sharp just at that moment, caught the blow full on the temple, and it brought him to the ground as if he had been shot.

And then Blake, having slipped behind Tinker Tom, played on him the same game which had worked so well with the other.

The stout fellow raved and swore, but the blows fell with the regularity of machinery.

Never in this world was a man better thrashed.

Some of the bystanders were so amused by the caperings of the ruffian that they were obliged to sit down in order to give full vent to their laughter.

And then Blake wound up the performance by giving Tinker Tom a whack on the head which again sent him to grass.

By this time Injun Jim had come to his senses, his head feeling as big as a bushel basket.

He rose to a sitting posture, looking thoroughly and utterly played out.

"Come on again!" exclaimed Blake, who did not seem to be at all tired, notwithstanding his exertions.

"Make a break to the front and face the music!" the sharp invited, whirling the stick in the air with such dextrous skill that any one could plainly see he was a perfect master of the weapon.

"I've got enough!" Injun Jim declared in deep disgust, and he flung his stick away.

"All right, I will be able to give more attention to your friend then."

Tinker Tom came to his senses just in time to hear this last remark.

"You needn't trouble yourself 'bout me, I am satisfied, I've got all I want," he growled, and he too threw his weapon down.

"Oh, it can't be possible!" Blake exclaimed, assuming to be surprised. "Why we have only just begun the game."

"You kin play it all alone by yourself for all of me," Tinker Tom replied, as he rose slowly to his feet. "I am through for good and all!"

Injun Jim was on his feet by this time, and was rubbing his back as though the sting of the blows still remained.

"Well, if both of you are satisfied that ends the matter," Blake remarked. "I didn't really expect though to have the picnic end quite so quickly."

"And now, boys, if you will have the kindness to shell out the few ducats according to agreement I shall be ever-so-much obliged to you."

The pair looked daggers, as the saying is, but they produced the money and handed it over to the sharp nevertheless.

"All right, and now that I have squared this little account I assure you that I don't bear any malice, and I will be pleased to have you come in and take a drink with me."

"All right, I don't bear you no ill-will neither, although you have got the best of me," the stout fellow replied.

"No, no malice," Injun Jim observed, but there was a look in his dark eyes which belied his words.

Then all went into the saloon and the sharp stood treat; the crowd were well represented at the bar too.

After this ceremony was over the pair took

their weapons and departed, while the miners crowded around Blake and congratulated him upon his success, and he only got rid of the miners by going in to dinner, where they allowed him to remain in peace.

#### CHAPTER XIX.

##### THE RANCHER'S STORY.

UNDER the circumstances it was not strange that Blake should become the hero of the hour, but as the sharp said to the landlord when he got a chance just after supper to have a little quiet chat with him:

"This sort of talk about me being the best man that ever struck this town is all very well, but I cannot see that there is going to be any money in it for me; soft words butter no parsnips, you know."

"Mine gootness! you hafe not any reason to complain!" the old Dutchman declared. "You hafe made ten tollars as easy as never vas. It vas shust like turning your hand over, mine fr'en'."

"Well, really, I am only five ahead, you know. In a moment of weakness I invited the boys to take something and it cost me a fiver."

"Vell, you are all right!" the old Dutchman argued. "You are sure of your board and lodging."

"Yes, but I want to get enough together to get out of this gone-broke camp!" Blake exclaimed.

"What is the use of a man like myself wasting my time in a town like this where there isn't any chance to pick up money, when I can go somewhere else—to some camp which is prosperous where I can stand a show to make a stake."

"Yesh, yesh, dot is true, business ish not good here," the saloon-keeper admitted.

"Maybe though I can get into a little game when the boys discover that I think I am a big chief at poker," Blake remarked in his cheerful way. "As a rule, you know, when a stranger comes to a camp and announces that he is one of the greatest poker-players living, all the lads who go into a game once in a while usually have a frantic desire to convince the sharp that he isn't half as good a player as he considers himself to be."

The old Dutchman shook his head.

"Ah, mine fr'en', I do not think dot game vill work here."

"Der boys hafe not got der ducats; if they had maybe you could get hold of some monish."

"Oh, well, if I can make as little as ten a night, I will not complain, for if I can keep it up for a week or two I will be able to put by money enough to carry me out of this dismal camp and give me a start somewhere else."

The saloon-keeper shook his head.

"You don't think there is much chance for me to do that, eh?" the sport inquired.

"Oh, no."

"But I don't see why it can't be done. There ought to be twenty men in the town who think they are good hands at cards," the sharp argued.

"Oh, yesh, I suppose dere ish."

"Well, if I can get ten dollars out of each one of them it will make two hundred dollars, and with that sum of money I shall be satisfied, for I can go away from here in good style."

"Mine gootness! mine fr'en', are you not making some mistake in your reckoning?" the old Dutchman exclaimed.

"No, I think not—twenty men at ten apiece is two hundred."

"Yesh, dot is so, but how can you be sure dot you will win from every mans?" the old fellow asked shrewdly.

"Ah, now I see what you are driving at," the sport remarked. "I suppose the calculation does look to be a little out of the way, but long experience has taught me that it is much more likely to come true than you imagine."

"When the average man sits down to play cards with a professional card-sharp he is encountering big odds, and straight luck may run his way for a while, so that he will win despite the odds, yet if he will only consent to keep on playing, in the long run the professional is bound to get his money, be the amount little or much."

"Vel, mine fr'en', I don't know but v'ot you are right," the saloon-keeper observed, after thinking over the matter for a few moments.

"You see I am only assuming that my men will lose only ten apiece, which is putting it low, but I can cut it down still more. I will say that I get only five apiece out of twenty men or ten out of ten men; that would give me a hundred, and I could get along on that."

"A hundred tollars is a big lot of monish," the old Dutchman observed.

"And you don't think I will get it?"

"No, my goot fr'en', I do not!" the host replied, decidedly. "The boys are broke; dey are only making a living und dey hafe no monish to spare. If you had come three months ago when der boom was on, den dere would hafe been a chance for you."

"How about this rancher—this Flowery Tompkins—isn't he well fixed?"

"Ah yesh! he is worth big monish."

"He is my man for a game then!" the sport declared.

"No, no, mine goot fr'en', you cannot work der trick; dot man does not play cards."

"That is a pity!"

"Many a time der boys hafe tried to rope him into a game, but he always says no, he does not care for cards."

"How about the man who keeps the store across the street? I should think from the looks of the store, and prices that he charged me, that he must have lots of money."

"Dot vas Vernal's store; he ish der alcalde."

"Ah, yes, the alcalde, the big boss of the camp, and does he ever take a little flyer at cards?"

"Never!" the old Dutchman replied, decidedly. "He does not care for such things."

"Well, are there any other men in or around the town, who have money, and whom I stand a chance to get at?"

The saloon-keeper reflected for a moment and then he shook his head.

"No, the only men who like to play cards are der ones who hav'n't got any monish."

"That is a mighty bad outlook!" the sharp declared.

"And the more I see of the town the greater becomes my regret that I ever headed this way."

"It was a bad break for you, mine fr'en'," the old Dutchman declared, solemnly.

"I will have to do the best I can, but I am afraid that I am going to find it mighty poor scratching," Blake remarked.

"You can help me along a little though if you will."

"Mine goot fr'en', it is as much as I can do to make mine expenses!" the old Dutchman hastened to declare.

"Oh, I don't mean with money!" the sport replied. "I have got enough to get along with at present."

"I only want to use you as a sort of bait to attract some fish to my net."

"Mine gootness! make bait out of me!" the saloon-keeper exclaimed in great surprise. "Vat foolishness ish dot?"

"Oh, you don't understand! I want you to blow to all the boys that I think I am the greatest poker-player that lives—that I am giving it out that there isn't a man in the world who stands any chance at poker with me, no matter if he has a million of ducats at his back!"

"Ah, yesh, yesh, I see; dot vas to make der boys anxious to try you on."

"Exactly; but if there isn't any of them with money to lose, I can't profit much even if they do take a hack at me in order to find out just what kind of a man I am," the sport observed.

Some customers entering the saloon at this point put an end to the conversation.

Blake took a chair and picked up a newspaper, but just as he began to read the rancher, Flowery Tompkins, came in.

The sport was sitting near the door, and the rancher, taking a chair by his side, volunteered the information that he had found the Irishman.

"Well, how did you find him?" Blake asked, feeling interested in the matter.

"Oh, he had got into a scrape," the rancher replied. "It takes one of these blunderhead Irishmen to get into mischief."

"That is true."

"He came along the trail all right until he got to the Long Prairie, which is about three miles west of the point where you caught the horse."

"A broad, open prairie, with timber three or four miles to the north?"

"Yes, that is the place. Well, as the blamed fool was crossing Long Prairie a jack-rabbit hopped up, and what does the idiot do but leave the trail and chase the rabbit."

"That is just the way with some men—they hav'n't any better sense!"

"If he had any gumption in his thick head he would not have wasted his time in any such foolish way, but he had a revolver, and he was just burning to shoot the rabbit, so he chased it clear into the timber away to the north, and after he got well into the wood—it was open, so he could ride through it all right—the horse put his foot into a hole and pitched Master Irishman over his head."

"He was stunned by the fall, and when he recovered his senses he found the horse had taken French leave, and he could see him a mile or two off on the prairie, making for home."

"The beast had more sense than the man," the sport observed.

"Yes, in this case it was certainly the truth," the rancher replied.

"At first the Irishman imagined that he was going to pay pretty dearly for his folly, for he had an idea that his leg was broken, as it had got twisted under him when he fell."

"He could not use it at all, and it gave him so much pain that it was a couple of hours before he could even crawl."

"How he must have cursed that jack rabbit!" the sport declared.

"Yes, I don't doubt that he made the air blue around him for some time."

"At last though he set out to crawl to the trail, knowing that the chances were big that no one would think of looking for him up in the woods."



"I don't envy the man his trip."

"No, nor do I. He had got within a mile of the trail when we rode along, and seeing us he attracted our attention by firing his revolver."

"It was a lucky thing for him that he got out of the scrape so easily!" Blake declared.

"Yes, I sent him home—we had a spare horse—and then I came back to the camp to look after this mine which I have just bought."

"Did you get a bargain?" the sport asked, more for the sake of keeping up the conversation than because he took any interest in the matter.

"Oh yes, the mine is worth six or eight hundred dollars more than I gave for it, and I can't understand why the owner accepted my offer."

"Needed the money badly, perhaps; you paid the cash right down and that, maybe, was an inducement."

"I hardly think so, for he has plenty of money, and can't be in want of any cash. I would never thought of making an offer for the property if he had not bantered me to do so, and when I made the offer I had no idea he would take it, and, in fact, I think he was sorry that he had done so the moment after, but he was too much of a man to go back on his word after he had once said a thing, but he tried to get out of it by insisting upon conditions that he thought I would kick at; so much money down, and all the balance by nine o'clock the next morning."

"I see, and you came within an ace of slipping up on the thing too, for if the road-agents had got you it would have been good-bye to your ducats," the sharp remarked.

"Yes, it really was a narrow shave. If I had come along the trail I would have been gobbled up to a moral certainty; and, when you come to think of it, don't it strike you as being mighty queer that these road-agents were so well posted?"

"That is part of the business, you know; if they did not have spies in the camps they would not be able to work so well."

And then a sudden idea came to Blake, and he proceeded to question the rancher in regard to it.

"I suppose plenty of people knew of this bargain of yours—particularly the agreement to show up with the cash on the following morning?"

"Well, now, I only mentioned it to a couple of friends—the two you saw me with this morning—but, of course, they may have given the snap away; I did not caution them not to speak of the matter, for I did not think anything about it; it was just the same to me, you know, whether people knew about it or not."

"Of course! What I was speculating upon was how the road-agents got the tip that you would be worth going for."

"My friends, probably, talked of the matter—it was natural, you know, and some spies of the outlaws heard of it and so put up the job."

"Yes, yes, very likely," Blake responded, but notwithstanding the speech there was another solution of the problem which he thought much more probable, for the sport was a keen-witted fellow—one used to diving beneath the surface of deceit and getting at the truth.

"Who sold you the mine?"

"The alcalde, Michael Vernal."

"A pretty good sort of a man?"

"Oh, yes, one of the leading citizens of the town—keeps the store."

"Ah, yes, I got my harness there."

A suspicion had gathered in the mind of the sport which he did not care to disclose to the rancher.

Had not the alcalde engineered the sale of the mine for the express purpose of giving the road-agents a chance to go for the rancher when he should ride to Painted City with the money to complete the bargain in his pocket?

That would imply that Vernal was a rascal. Blake knew nothing of the man excepting that he charged outrageous prices for his goods, but some way he had formed a bad impression of him.

## CHAPTER XX.

### A MYSTERIOUS COMMUNICATION.

As Blake did not see fit to make known his suspicions to his companion, the conversation turned to other matters.

Tompkins had heard the story of the prowess displayed by the sport, and took occasion to compliment him upon his ability.

"I told you right at the beginning that I was a good man, and I wanted you to help me pick up a few ducats by backing me against some fellow who had a big reputation as a fighter," Blake remarked.

"Well, I will be glad to do it now."

"Ah, yes, no doubt! But it is too late; the town has got a line on me; they know pretty well what I can do, and all chance of making a big pot of money is gone."

"If you had taken me when I was an unknown, we might have been able to do something."

Just then some friends of the rancher came in and called him away, so Blake was left alone.

The sport wandered around the town until about eleven o'clock, the observed of all observers, and if his desire had been to go to bed as "full as a tick" he could easily have accomplished it, for invitations to drink poured in upon him, but Blake smilingly begged to be excused, pleading that he wasn't very well, and did not feel like liquor, an excuse which made his hearers smile.

"Lordy!" cried a miner, voicing the opinions of the rest, "if you are a sick man now, what kind of a man are you when you are well?"

The sport replied that this was a conundrum, and as he wasn't good at that sort of thing he should have to give it up.

But the "little game" that Blake was looking for so earnestly he did not find.

The men of the camp were a jovial lot, and the sport had no doubt that he would be speedily accommodated with all the poker games he cared to play if the miners had money, but as they hadn't, they could not gamble.

The proprietor of the Canary-bird Saloon was quite right, as Blake soon discovered, when he had said that all the game that could be successfully run in the town was keno.

And after Blake had wandered around for a good hour, he settled down in Sandy Torquis's place and played keno until it was time to go to bed.

The sport's bad luck stuck persistently to him; he could not even win a stake at keno, which, as every one knows, is a game where science and calculation have no place, and the players must depend upon the pure chance of fortune.

Not a single "pot" could the sport win, and when Sandy, a little after eleven, announced that the game was closed for the night, Blake was exactly three dollars out.

He went to the hotel feeling extremely blue. The rancher was in the saloon when he entered, and the pair took a "night-cap" before going to bed.

"How did you make out at keno?" Tompkins asked.

"Couldn't win a stake to save me!" Blake replied. "I don't understand it. Since I headed for this town, things have not been coming my way at all."

"That is odd."

"Yes, it is; I never had luck run counter so long before in my life; I must do something to change it, or I am a goner."

"I reckon somebody must have cast a hoodoo over me!"

"But it isn't possible that you can believe in anything of that kind!" the rancher exclaimed in amazement.

"Well, no, I don't, as a rule, but I will own up that I am all at sea now."

"Few men who follow cards for a living but are more or less superstitious, you know. I didn't think I was much troubled that way, but if this run of ill luck keeps up much longer, I shall begin to believe that somebody has cast a spell over me," and Blake smiled grimly as he made the remark.

"There is a deal in luck, of course; any man of sense must admit that, but I don't believe much in the idea that one human can bring another human either good or bad luck!" Tompkins declared.

"It is a very peculiar subject, and one that will bear considerable discussion," Blake said, slowly. "I don't think I can bank much on the theory that one man can bring good or evil luck to another by simply wishing; that savors of the old-time mockery of spells and witchcraft, but I do believe that there are some men who carry good or bad luck with them, and all who have anything to do with the man get a taste of his luck; as a rule the luck is bad."

"Yes, that is so," the rancher affirmed, thoughtfully. "When I come to look back I can see several instances which go for to prove that there is something in the theory."

"Exactly! you can recall men who never seemed to have any luck themselves, and when they were associated with different men, the men did not do well."

"Yes, that is the truth, but it is one of those complex and mysterious things which perplex the mind of the investigator. The more they are examined the greater is the puzzle."

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy," the rancher quoted.

"Yes, as you observed, there isn't any use of a man wasting his time over the matter, thinking that he is going to tell how the old thing works, because it can't be done."

"Now, in this case, my luck is bad, and I want to change it."

"Yes, but that is something that you can not do!" Tompkins affirmed.

"I am not so sure about that," Blake responded. "I have figured the thing out this way:

"My luck is bad. In order to change it I must contrive to get in opposition to some man whose general run of luck is not as good as mine."

"Yes, yes, I see!" the rancher declared. "That is very nicely figured out, but do you think you can manage it?"

"It is my belief that I can, but it is one of

those things which can not be decided in advance," Blake replied.

"Of course I understand that," the rancher observed. "Events alone can settle the question."

"Yes, that is the truth. I am in a bad hole here, and all I can do is to wait patiently until the chance comes for me to get out."

"At all events you will not starve," Tompkins remarked. "That is—if what I hear is true—that you have been engaged by the old Dutchman to act as bouncer."

"Yes, it is a fact," Blake admitted. "I am a peculiar sort of chap, you know, anyhow. It seems to be an impossibility for me to keep quiet. If there is a fight going on when I am around, the chances are about a hundred to one that I will become mixed up in it, and in nine cases out of ten I do not really take any interest in the matter. I go in simply because it seems impossible for me to keep out."

"Well, I made up my mind some time ago that you were an odd genius, and now I am sure of it!" the rancher declared.

"It isn't my fault, for I was born that way," the Fresh replied. "But let us have another glass of ale and then go to bed."

The ale was drank and then the two parted, Tompkins going up-stairs to his room, while the landlord conducted Blake to his sleeping apartment.

The old Dutchman had given his bouncer a small room on the first floor in the rear of the building, where the barkeeper used to sleep when business had been good enough to warrant the hotel in indulging in such a luxury.

It was a small room, about eight by ten, with a window in the end, which was tightly barred by a heavy shutter, pierced with some crescent-shaped holes in the upper part so as to let in a little light.

There was no way of getting into, or out of the room, excepting by the narrow passage which led from the rear of the saloon.

The landlord had not gone to much expense in furnishing the apartment.

The bed was simply a tick filled with prairie hay laid upon some shoe-boxes, and as mall, flat box placed under the head of the tick elevated the end into a pillow, over the tick a couple of coarse blankets were spread.

Two boxes, one small and the other large, served for a table and chair.

Vandergaw had brought a lighted candle with him and this he placed upon the table.

"Dere, mine goot fr'en, you vill be ash comfortable as a bug in a rug in dis place!" the old Dutchman declared looking around him with an air of great satisfaction.

"Oh, yes, this will do very well; besides, you know, just now I am going on the principle that beggars shouldn't be choosers."

"Vel, goot-night; maybe you vill strike some goot luck pretty soon," and then the landlord withdrew.

Blake took a look at the fastening of the door after the Dutchman was gone.

All it had on it was a common latch, with a catch over the working part, so it could be rendered immovable by any one in room.

"I don't think much of that," the sharp remarked as he surveyed the flimsy affair.

"If any one wanted to get at me that thing wouldn't keep them out."

"Still, as I lie on the opposite side of the room, with my feet to the door, and with my revolver handy, if the door was burst in I would stand a good chance to make it warm for the intruders before they could get within damage distance, for the moment an attempt was made to burst in the door I should be up, revolver in hand, peppering away at them, so as long as that latch is all right I reckon it would not be an easy matter to catch me at a disadvantage."

Then Blake sat down on the box and looked around him for a moment busy in thought.

"Both of those fellows said that they didn't bear any malice, although I dusted their jackets so well for them, and they took a drink with me to prove that they meant what they said," he murmured.

"But when they can succeed in catching a weasel asleep then they may hope to pull the wool over my eyes," and the sport chuckled softly to himself as he made the declaration.

"Why, it would be against all nature for those two fellows to be willing to let the matter stop where it is."

"Men of their stamp would never rest until they had secured revenge."

"I don't doubt that I gave them the worst thrashing they ever received, and such scoundrels will do their best to get even with me."

"And who is the man in the camp from whom they received their information?" the sport continued.

"I must look out for him for he will undoubtedly do all he can to help his pals get a crack at me."

"If I keep my eyes open the chances are big that I will be able to spot him before long."

Then having arrived at this conclusion the sport prepared for rest.

First he placed the candle on the floor and piled the boxes up against the door, so if the door was opened, they would be thrown down,



then he removed his boots, blew out the candle and stretched himself between the blankets, his revolver by his side.

Motionless he remained for a good ten minutes and was just falling asleep when a low whistle came to his ears.

Blake was on the alert in an instant. He sat bolt upright and looked around him.

"Hello! what does this mean?" he muttered, all his vigilance aroused.

The whistle sounded as though it had been given in the room, but the sport knew that it could not be possible, for he had carefully examined the surroundings before he went to sleep, and he knew that a good-sized cat could not find concealment in the apartment, much less a man.

Blake waited for a few moments, eyes and ears strained to their utmost, but nothing more could he hear.

"It cannot be possible that I had really fallen asleep and dreamed I heard a whistle?" he murmured.

"I would have sworn that though I was dosing, yet I was awake enough to know what was going on.

Again the low whistle came to his ears and then a hoarse voice, speaking in a subdued, cautious tone said:

"Are you awake?"

The sport stared, for it seemed as if the speaker was in the room.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE SPORT GETS AN OFFER.

BLAKE looked around him for a moment in astonishment.

The room was light, not plunged in darkness, for there was a bright moon without, and stray rays of light came through the holes in the shutter so the sport could make out all the objects in the apartment, for his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and he had no difficulty in seeing clearly.

There wasn't any one in the room.

Blake felt pretty sure that there was not before he began his examination, but he looked around in order to satisfy himself.

"No one could have got in by the door without raising a racket," he murmured.

"Of course it is possible that there is a secret entrance somewhere," he continued, as the idea came to him.

"I did not think of anything of the kind, and so I did not go to the trouble of making an examination, but there may be a secret door in the wall, or a trap door in the floor, although such little tricks are not usually found in regular hotels. They only exist in thieves' dens, where it is a part of the programme to rob the lodger as he sleeps, but the Dutchman is not the man to run a ranch of that kind, and I am not the sort of a fellow who would be likely to be selected for a victim either, for anybody in the camp who knows anything about me is aware that I haven't many ducats."

The owner of the hoarse voice had evidently come to the conclusion that Blake was asleep, for he called out in decidedly louder tones.

"Hey, sport, wake up!" cried the mysterious voice. "That's work for you!"

"All right! I am awake," Blake replied, straining his ears to discover from whence the voice came, and, as nearly as he could judge, he imagined that it proceeded from the further end of the room, and therefore the natural conclusion was that the speaker stood in the entry at the door.

"Anyway, the fellow evidently doesn't mean mischief, whoever he is," was the Fresh's muttered conclusion. "For if he did he would not have taken the trouble to wake me up."

"How do you find yourself?"

"Pretty well—how are you?" replied Blake, politely, and with the notion that this was about the queerest proceeding that he had ever heard of in all his vast experience.

The idea that a man—a stranger, of course—he could tell that by the voice—should take the trouble to come and wake him up in the middle of the night, to ask how he was, seemed to him to be utterly ridiculous.

"How do you like this camp as far as you have got?" the voice questioned.

"This fellow must be a little cracked in the upper story, I reckon, to come at this hour of the night and bother me with such questions?" was Blake's thought, but as he concluded to humor the man, so as to lead him on, he replied:

"Well, to tell you the honest truth, stranger, I shall have to admit that I do not think much of the place."

"Things are pretty dull," said the other in a reflective way.

"Dull! well, I should say so! It is more like a graveyard than any camp I ever struck."

"You ought to have been hyer three or four months ago; things were booming!"

"So I have been told."

"You could have made big money then."

"Sorry I did not come, but it is too late now; you cannot grind with the water that is past, and you never miss the lager until the keg runs dry," Blake remarked, thinking to have a little fun with the mysterious stranger.

"If you hadn't happened to strike this job as

bouncer, I reckon you would have had a hard time of it."

"Yes, maybe; but, I say, my friend, what business is it of yours?" asked the Fresh, a little annoyed by the speech.

"Sports in hard luck don't stand much show in this town."

"Don't you bother your head about sports, whether they are in good or bad luck," Blake retorted. "Just you take care to keep as far away from them as you can, and you will be all right."

"Yes, I know that."

"And, I say: suppose you clear out and let me go to sleep?" the sport suggested, coming to the conclusion that his visitor was some light-headed fellow who had taken more whisky than was good for him, although from his tones no one would suppose he had been drinking.

"Come to-morrow, and I will talk to you until you are tired," Blake said in conclusion, hoping to thus get rid of his visitor.

"Oh, no, I want to talk to you to-night," the voice replied, much to the sport's astonishment.

"You do, eh?"

"Yes; it is nice and quiet now, everybody in the hotel is in bed, and we can have a little talk without any one knowing anything about it."

"What difference does that make?" Blake demanded. "What does it matter whether anybody knows that we are talking together or not?"

"It makes a heap of difference; it wouldn't do at all! All the fat would be in the fire then," the voice declared.

"Well, maybe you understand what you are talking about, but I will be hanged if I do!" the sport declared.

"You will when I explain."

"I suppose so; and, my friend, if you will go ahead and explain as soon as possible, I will be much obliged to you."

"Oh, yes, I will."

"I want to go to bed and get some sleep, you know," Blake observed. "It may be fun for you to prowl around all night, but I am not built that way."

"It will take me but a little while to explain, but the business is important, and therefore I wanted to talk to you in private, and fix the thing so that no one could possibly know anything about it."

"Well, I reckon you have got it that way now."

"I think so; you are the only person on the lower floor of the house, all the rest are up-stairs, and then too they are sound asleep by this time."

"Oh, yes, yes, everything is all right, so go ahead with your talk!" exclaimed Blake, anxious to get rid of the unknown.

He did not believe that the communication would amount to anything, and therefore was desirous to bring the interview to a close as soon as possible.

"It is a mighty important business matter!" the voice declared.

"Well, it ought to be, or else you deserve to be kicked for waking me out of my sleep."

"I know that you are broke, and, of course, are anxious to make a stake."

"I am not broke so much as I was, but go ahead with your bird's egging, all the same," Blake retorted.

"You know you need money mighty bad, or else you wouldn't have taken this bouncer job!"

"Oh, I did that for fun!" the sport declared.

"You see, you haven't been introduced to me yet, and you don't understand that a little fighting once in a while is just a picnic to me, so you can't reckon as you think you can."

"You are open to make a stake though?"

"Yes, yes! are there any men in this town who are not troubled in that way?" the sport asked.

"I s'pose not; but it was my reckoning that you would be mighty glad to go into any speculation where there was a chance to catch big money."

"Now you are talking!" the sport declared.

"You are right! I am open for offers. What is the game?"

"There's big money in it," the voice replied in an evasive way.

"You said that before, and I will tell you frankly, right now, that I have not sufficient confidence in you at present to take any stock in your statement unless you make a full explanation."

"I must give the thing away, eh?"

"Yes, if you calculate to rope me into it you will have to do so!" Blake replied in a decided way.

"You see, my friend, for all my reckless fool-hardy ways, I have cautious streaks sometimes, and as a rule too I object to buying a cat in a bag."

"Well, I s'pose you are right," the mysterious unknown remarked, after a few moments of silence, during which the sport conjectured that he had been cogitating upon the matter.

"You can bet all you are worth that I am right, and if you do not feel inclined to make a full explanation, have the kindness to clear out so I can go to sleep."

"Will you give me your word to keep the thing quiet whether you go into it or not?" the voice asked.

The sport reflected for a moment upon the proposition and then said:

"All right, I will agree to that, but if you have any doubts in regard to my discretion you are not obliged to say anything."

"You know that this business is all of your own getting up. I didn't ask you to make any offer to me, but if you want me for a pard, you can bet your life that I am going to know in advance just what kind of a speculation it is that I am going into," Blake continued with firm determination.

"It is natural, I s'pose," the unknown responded. "I would not have thought of asking you to go into this thing if you had not made such a good showing with the Baby Elephant and the other two."

"That convinced you that I was a good man to have for a pard, eh?" the sport observed, a trace of humor in his voice.

"Yes, you are just the man I want; a man who is not afraid to take big risks and who can be depended upon in the hour of danger."

"Hello, hello!" muttered the sport under his breath, "this sounds as though the fellow really does mean business, but what is his little game, I wonder?"

Then he said aloud:

"Well, what I have done since I came to the town ought to give you a good idea of what I can do. I don't make any boast, but when danger comes I don't usually run away from it."

"I am sure of that and you are just the man for Captain Blood!"

## CHAPTER XXII.

### BLAKE'S DETERMINATION.

BLAKE was completely astonished at this declaration, for he had not expected anything of the kind.

"Captain Blood!" he exclaimed.

"That is what I said," the voice replied. "You are just the man for me."

"Do you think so?"

"Oh, yes, I want a bold, resolute fellow who isn't afraid to stand up to his man when the time comes, and you are just the one to fill the bill."

"Really now you flatter me!" the sport declared, not knowing what to make of this strange affair.

"Oh, no, not at all!" the mysterious unknown declared. "You are a first-class man for a little off-color business; when I stopped you on the trail and you took matters so coolly I got the idea that you were a little out of the common run, and so I took pains to keep my eyes on you after you got to the town."

"Ah, you did, eh?"

"Oh, yes; of course I kept in the background, but I knew everything that was going on, and when I saw that I was right about your being an extra good man I made up my mind to see if I couldn't do a little business with you."

"Yes, yes," the sport said slowly.

"Now if you want to make a stake I think I can fix the matter with you, all right."

"Hold on a moment and let me get a clear understanding about this thing!" exclaimed Blake, abruptly.

"What don't you understand?" the unknown asked.

"You are Captain Blood?"

"I am."

"The leader of the band of road-agents who stopped me on the trail, thinking I was the rancher, Flowery Tompkins?"

"Yes, the same."

"But you are not, you know, not by a jugful!" the sport declared.

"Well, I reckon I ought to know whether I am or not!" the mysterious speaker responded in quite an angry tone.

"You ought to for a fact, but at the same time you can bet all you're worth that I know the man who stopped me on the trail, who said he was Captain Blood, and you are not the party!" Blake asserted in the most positive manner.

"How can you tell whether I am or not when it is not possible for you to see me?" the mysterious visitor asked.

"I know by your voice that you are not the man!" Blake replied, immediately.

"Oh, but I ain't speaking in my natural voice now," the other affirmed.

"Come off!" the sport exclaimed. "That is entirely too thin! You cannot play that on me."

"But I am the man, I tell you!"

"And I tell you that you are not the one who stopped me on the trail."

"Don't fool yourself with the idea that you can pull any wool over my eyes because you can't do it."

"I had it in for Captain Blood for that little business on the trail, and since coming to this camp I have been able to square the account in the most satisfactory manner—that is satisfactory to me. I doubt if Captain Blood admires the way in which the thing was settled, still he ought to console himself with the thought that we can't be all winners in the same game."

"I understand what you mean. You think that Tinker Tom is Captain Blood?"

"I don't think anything about it!" Blake retorted quickly. "I know that he is—that is if



he told the truth when he said that his name was Captain Blood.

"That may not be so," the sport continued. "I have only got his word for it, and I wouldn't like to risk much upon his truthfulness, but I am certain that he is the man who stopped me on the trail, and his long-legged companion was the rear guard."

"I spotted both of them by their walk the moment they came into the saloon, and that was the reason why I went for them."

"It was in my mind to have a reckoning with Captain Blood and his gang for that trail business, and I think any unprejudiced judge would decide that at the present moment I am a leetle ahead," and there was a strong tinge of complacency in the sharp's tone as he made the declaration.

"I will not attempt to argue the point with you seeing that you are so set about it," the other remarked.

"You are wise; it would not do you a bit of good, stranger; you might talk from now to the crack of doom and you couldn't change my opinion. I know I am right and that's all there is to it."

"Well, it doesn't matter whether I am the man who stopped you on the road or not. I am the boss of the gang, anyway."

"That may be true; I am not disputing it."

"And if you choose to go in with me you can be Captain Blood, if you like."

"The title and name is a movable one, then?"

"I reckon I can arrange it that way."

"You will make me a regular big chief, eh?"

"That is what I said, and I will do it, too, if you join me."

"But, see here, my mysterious friend, there are some little points about this game that I don't exactly understand," Blake remarked.

"What are they? Maybe I can explain."

"Of course a man don't go into a game of this sort without he sees a chance to make big money, for there is a deal of risk."

"Oh, no, there isn't!"

"How do you make that out?" Blake demanded. "When a man goes on the road to hold unwary travelers up, don't he take his life in his hands? Isn't he liable to be plugged by some fellow who is ready and willing to fight for his valuables?"

"Well, you know a man must keep his wits about him, and work the trick so that the fellows whom he holds up will not have any chance to show fight," the voice replied.

"Few men you know will attempt to resist when there isn't any show for them to do anything."

"That is true; but then again, no matter how carefully a man may plan, the best-laid schemes slip up once in a while."

"Yes, but if a man is careful there isn't one chance out of a thousand but what he can work the trick without any trouble."

"In the first place, ninety-nine men in a hundred will not dare to show fight when the hold-up takes place, even if they stood a fair show to win, and not one in ten thousand will be apt to pull a weapon when he finds himself in a hole, so the risk does not amount to anything."

"Well, I don't doubt that you have this all figured down pretty finely, still there is a certain risk, and there's no mistake about it!"

"Nothing venture, nothing win, you know."

"That is correct; I understand all about that," Blake remarked. "And then there is another thing to be taken into consideration. After awhile the law is certain to get after all gangs of this kind, and the sheriff takes a hand in the game; he is apt to make it interesting for the fellows who have been playing roots on travelers."

"Well, all trouble of that kind is easily avoided," the voice rejoined.

"When the sheriff comes into the game, then the men whom he is after must scatter and keep quiet until he goes out, and, if they are wise enough to keep their tongues between their teeth, the odds are big they will not be discovered."

"I see you understand how the game ought to be played."

"Oh, yes, I run the thing—do the planning, you know, and you do the work."

"You don't take an active part in it yourself?"

"No, my business is to put up the jobs, you and the others execute them; then the plunder is brought to me and I get rid of it."

"Ah, yes."

"You see, the thing is skillfully planned," the voice continued. "The men who do the work never have to get rid of the plunder, and that saves them from the danger of being caught."

"Yes, yes."

"And if by some piece of ill-luck a victim should recognize some of his valuables when they are in my hands, my story that I bought them from a stranger who said he was strapped, and obliged to dispose of them, would certainly be believed, for if anybody doubted it I could easily prove that I could not possibly have had anything to do with the robbery."

"A very nicely arranged game!" the sport ex-

claimed in a tone which seemed to indicate that he was greatly impressed with it.

"It has always worked splendidly with me, and I don't see any reason why it should not keep right on doing so," the unknown replied, in a self-satisfied tone.

"But there is another point—you see, I am a regular doubting Thomas!" the sport declared.

"It seems to me that you are a mighty hard man to satisfy!" the voice asserted; the mysterious unknown was evidently displeased.

"I always make it a rule to know all the points of a game before I go into it," Blake replied.

"Go ahead! what else do you want to know?"

"The inducement offered for me to go into this thing is that there's a chance for me to make a big stake?"

"Yes, that is it."

"But I don't see where the chance comes in around this neighborhood," the sport remarked.

"I have been in duller places than this—graveyards and abandoned camps, where only the ruins remained to show that a town had once existed, but no place that ever I struck yet was so completely broke as this Painted City."

"Now, then, as there isn't any money in the town, where does this big stake come from that you talk about?"

"Well, the town isn't so badly off as you think. Individually the miners perhaps have not got much money, but, collectively, they have a good deal. Have you any idea of how much money the Express takes out of the town once or twice a month?"

"No, I haven't; not much, I should judge."

"There is where you are away off!" the voice declared. "From five to six thousand dollars."

"I wouldn't have believed it!"

"It is the truth. Now, to hold up the coach and get the Express treasure seems to be a very pretty job."

"Yes, if it can be worked," Blake responded, in a tone which showed he had a great deal of doubt in regard to the feasibility of the idea.

"I will arrange a plan so that the job can be worked without any difficulty. You let me alone for that. This is where I come in. Just you agree to join me, and I will find plenty of good jobs for you."

"Of course you ought to know, for I reckon you are acquainted with the ground, while I am not."

"Oh, yes, I know what I am talking about. Is it a go, then?"

"See here! I can't give you an answer now. I've got to think this matter over," the sport exclaimed, abruptly.

"I don't see any necessity of that," the unknown growled, evidently disappointed.

"You may not, but I do!" Blake replied, decidedly. "I must have two or three days to deliberate. I am not going to rush into any game without knowing what I am about."

"All right; in three days I will come again. Good-night!"

"Good-night!" replied the sport, at the same time leaping with nimbleness and caution from the bunk.

#### CHAPTER XXIII.

##### GETTING POSTED.

BLAKE hastened to the door, listened for a moment, expecting to hear the sound of footsteps retreating along the passageway, but as not the slightest noise disturbed the stillness of the night he was amazed.

Hastily he removed the boxes and opened the door.

The entry was a long one, for the kitchen and store-room of the hotel were between Blake's apartment and the saloon.

But as the sport peered out into the gloom no dark figure hastening along the passage met his eyes.

The sharp was puzzled.

He had acted so promptly that it was not possible for the unknown to have got through the entry before he opened the door without making considerable noise.

At the rear end of the entry was a door which led to the open air.

Blake tried this. It was bolted on the inside.

"Well, he did not go that way!" the sport exclaimed.

At the other end of the passage were three doors, and all of them were locked as the sport soon ascertained.

"The fellow must have been outside the house, but I will find out for sure in the morning."

Then Blake returned to bed, but it was some time before he fell asleep, for this mysterious affair suggested a new train of thought to him.

"Is this a good square offer or is it a trap?" the sport mused.

"Are the rascals whom I thrashed so well anxious to get me in a hole so as to get square for the beating I gave them?"

Blake mused over this question for a few moments and then he shook his head.

"No, I don't believe that that is the case. The man was honest enough in his offer. I thrashed two of his men—the best that there is in the gang, probably, and the idea came to him that I would be a valuable man to secure," and the lips of the sport curled in contempt as he made the remark.

"There is no doubt in my mind that the man spoke the truth when he said he was boss of the gang, for this Tinker Tom hasn't got brains enough to get up a big game."

"He is nothing but a tool, fit only to carry out somebody else's orders."

"I suspected that from the first; for it did not take me long to see that the attack on the rancher was planned by a man who had a head on his shoulders, and would have succeeded too if the rancher had come by the trail."

"Now this business suggests an idea to me. The man in the background—the head devil, so to speak—evidently has a poor opinion of card-sharps, and of a gentleman of about my size in particular; he thinks I am such a miserable scoundrel that if I can't make a living by gambling I am quite ready and willing to become a robber and a cut-throat. If he did not think so he never would have taken the trouble to make me an offer to join his gang."

"I could tell from the way he spoke that he hadn't any doubt but what I would be glad to go in with him, and he was astonished that I did not jump at the offer, which goes plainly to show that he has a terrible bad opinion of me."

"Maybe though he will have reason to change his mind when he comes to know me better," the sport ejaculated with a grim smile.

"Right in the beginning I suspected that there was a man in the camp engineering the thing. Now, I am sure of it, and I see a chance ahead for business."

"Since I cannot make a living by card-playing, I will go into the detective line and amuse myself by hunting down this gang of scoundrels."

"I don't know as there will be much money in it for me, but there will be a heap of fun, and as I am sure of my living here I can afford to go ahead."

"The chances are big, though, that there is a reward offered for some of the men of the gang, and although, as a rule, I don't care to bother with blood-money, yet this time I think I will go in for it, for it is my idea that if I do not join this gang they will do their best to make this camp uncommonly warm for me."

And the Fresh chuckled quietly to himself as though he thought such an action on the part of the outlaws would be considerable of a joke.

"I will look into the matter in the morning, and then we will see who in this dangerous game can play the best cards."

"In my time I have acted many parts, and this little bloodhound business will not bother me much, I am thinking."

"First I am a bouncer, then I am a detective, combine the two, and you have the Bouncer Detective! Quite a novelty, you know!"

And chuckling over the matter, as though he considered it the finest kind of a jest, the sport fell asleep.

In the morning Blake was up bright and early, despite the fact that he had not got to sleep until long after midnight.

He got breakfast, and then proceeded to pump the landlord in regard to the doings of Captain Blood and his gang.

The old Dutchman was ready enough with his information.

The story he told was as follows:

Painted City had been troubled by road-agents right from the founding of the camp, but the fellows seemed to work by fits and starts, for after a robbery the outlaws would disappear, and the most persistent search failed to discover any trace of them, and then just as the citizens had begun to congratulate themselves that they would not hear any more of the rascals, they would suddenly appear again.

And it was noted as a strange fact, that they seldom made a raid unless there was a chance to get a good, big haul.

"How does the Express manage about their treasure?" the sport asked, carelessly. "I suppose the rascals have got away with the Express money pretty often?"

The landlord replied in the negative, and he explained that the first time the outlaws ever appeared, the coach was attacked and a thousand dollars taken, and this irritated the Express company so much that they put a dozen detectives on the trail, and for three months an unremitting search was made.

"But they did not get their men?" Blake remarked.

Vandergaw replied that the supposition was correct. Then the Express people put a heavy guard on the coach whenever treasure was carried, and the outlaws were apparently aware of this fact, for they never made an attempt to molest the coach.

"Do the coaches carry a guard now?" the sharp asked, carelessly, as if he was only talking to pass the time away.

"Yesh, once a month, when der treasure is taken away."

"But how is it taken care of in the meantime?"

"Der agent has a big safe, und der monish was kept in dot."

"Oh, I see; it is perfectly secure, then; no robbers could get into the safe?"

"Mine gootness, no!" the old Dutchman declared. "It was a burglar-proof safe, und der agent shleep mid der office, mit bells on der



doors und windows, so dot nobody him could get at."

"He has got the racket nicely arranged," Blake remarked.

"Yesh, yesh, dere ish no danger dot anybody vill trouble him."

"What sort of a man is the agent—a pretty good fellow?"

"Yesh, he ish a nice man when he does not get mad, but when he gets his mad up den look out for squalls!" Vandergaw declared.

"Goes on the war-path, eh?"

"Yesh, yesh; he is a big man mit a Sandy beard, about as big as der Baby Elephant, and he is a hard drinker, and when he drinks more liquor dan ish goot for him den dere vas music."

"Quite a sport!" Blake observed. "How is he on cards—does he ever play?"

"He used to, but he ish not der kind of mans dot people like to play mit," the landlord replied with a cautious look around, as though he was afraid some one would overhear his words.

"How is that?" the sharp inquired, his curiosity excited by the statement.

"Don't say anything about v'at I tells you," the old Dutchman continued.

"Oh, that is all right; you can depend upon me," Blake replied, "I will not say a word."

"He might be mad, you know, und I would not like to have trouble mit him."

"Certainly not! A man is always wise to keep out of all the trouble he can!" the sport declared with the air of an oracle.

The old Dutchman looked at him in astonishment. He was amazed to hear this counsel coming from the lips of a man who had rushed into a couple rows when he might just as well kept out of them.

And Vandergaw said as much to Blake.

The sport laughed.

"Pard, you must go by what I say, not by what I do."

"When it comes to advice I am the safest man in the world to tie to, but I will not say that anybody ought to follow my example. It would not be wise, for in many cases the imitator would be apt to get into a heap of trouble."

"Mine gootness! yesh, I believe dot!"

"You are right for a thousand ducats!" Blake exclaimed. "And now, tell me why the boys do not like to play cards with the Express agent?"

"Because he ish not a good loser."

"Ah, yes, I see!"

"Ven de luck does not run his vay he gets his mad up, und he is certain to say ugly t'ings 'bout der boys mit whom he plays."

"And that is not agreeable, of course."

"You bet me your life dot it ish not. No mans likes to be called a cheat right mit his face!"

"Oh! you don't mean to say that the Express agent is foolish enough to lose his temper and insult the men he is playing with because he is not lucky with the cards?"

"Yesh, yesh, mine gootness! I do not believe dot mans ever sat down der cards to play in this house dot der game did not break up mit a row."

"He is not a good hand at cards, and generally loses, then?"

"Yesh, he does not know anything about playing at all, and he t'inks, too, dot he is a bully player."

"I should imagine he would be apt to get hammered if he insulted the men with whom he plays," the sport remarked.

"He ish such a big fellow dot der most of der boys are afraid of him."

"Well, as far as that goes, eight inches of bright steel, or a little bit of lead, with some gunpowder to help it along, puts a little man on an equality with a big one," the sport remarked.

"Dot has happened, too, but der Express agent—Wash Johnson is his name—has always managed to come shust a leetle bit ahead."

"He is one of the big chiefs of the town, then?"

"Yesh, he is one of dem fellers dot der other mans do not care to meddle with."

"A game with him, then, means that he wins or you fight?" Blake observed, reflectively.

"Dot ish true, so helup me gracious!" exclaimed the old Dutchman, with uplifted hands.

"But the great point is—how much money can this Mister Wash Johnson be depended upon to put up in a game?" the sport asked.

"Eh?" and the saloon-keeper stared.

"Do you suppose now that if I got him into a little game that I could rely upon his backing his hand to the extent of fifty or a hundred dollars?"

"Fifty er a hundred tollars!" Vandergaw exclaimed in amazement.

"Yes, that is what I said," the sport replied.

"Has he got sand enough to back himself to the tune of fifty or a hundred if he thought he had a sure thing and couldn't lose?"

"Vell, I don't know," the old Dutchman replied, scratching his head thoughtfully. "Fifty to von hundred tollars ish big money, you know."

"Yes, but he has the cash all right, hasn't he?" the sport inquired.

"Oh, yesh, yesh, he has der monish sure enough."

"Then the chances are big that he will put it up if I can get him into a game."

"Say! why on earth didn't you tell me about this Express sharp when I was inquiring where I could find a fellow with some cash?"

"Vell, I did not think of him, und den if I had, v'at vas der use of telling you of a mans dot would go crazy mad und want to fight mit you if you his monish did vin?" the saloon-keeper remarked with a wise shake of the head.

"Oh, a little thing of that kind doesn't worry an old sport like myself, you know," Blake replied with a cool indifference which excited the surprise of the old Dutchman.

"You do not mind a leetle thing like dot, hey?" Vandergaw exclaimed in profound astonishment.

"Oh, no; a man in my line of business must get used to all sorts of queer customers," the sharp replied.

"Men who play cards well enough to give them the notion that they are able to skin professional gamblers are much more apt to turn out to be devils than angels when you get them right down to the bed-rock, and it is natural to expect a prodigious kick from some of them when they make the discovery that they are not quite so smart with the painted paste-boards as they imagine."

"Vell, mine frien', you can bet me your life dot if you play cards with der Express man dot you will be in for der bulliest kind of a row if you gets der best of him."

"I guess I will have to risk it, because I need money badly and if the Express agent has sand enough to venture his money, I will win it if I can, row or no row."

"Where is the office, by the way?"

"Up der street, just beyond der alcalde's store."

"All right; I will pay him a little visit and see how the old thing works," Blake remarked.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

BLAKE sauntered along the street until he reached the corner of the house and then a sudden idea came to him.

"I neglected to make that examination I thought of last night," he murmured.

"As the man with the mysterious voice wasn't in the entry it follows that he either spoke through the ceiling, or the floor, or the outside wall."

"The ceiling and floor I have examined, without finding any clew to the mystery, and now I will look at the outside of the house."

It did not take Blake long to discover how the trick had been worked when he got to the back of the house.

About a yard from the back door an old packing-box stood against the rear wall; the sport stepped on the box and discovered that there was a crack in the wall at just about the level of his mouth; one of the boards had been split in the nailing, and as the wall only consisted of a single thickness of boards it was an easy matter for a man to stand on the box and throw his voice through the crack into the room.

"Well, that explains the matter," the sport remarked. "And now the question comes—how did this party know that I was going to occupy this particular room?"

"If the landlord gave the information I can easily find out from him who inquired concerning the matter and that may give me a clew to the owner of the voice."

To settle the matter so we will not have to refer to it again we will here state that when the sport inquired of the landlord concerning the matter, the old Dutchman declared in the most positive manner that no one had said a word to him about the subject, and Blake, thus baffled, came to the conclusion that the unknown must have kept watch through one of the windows and seen Vandergaw conduct him to the rear room.

There was no reason why this maneuver could not have been performed, and the sport became satisfied, after thinking the matter over carefully, that it was the way the trick had been done.

After his investigation Blake proceeded to the Express Office, which was a one-storied building, constructed much more stoutly than the usual run of houses in the camp.

Blake walked in and greeted the occupant with a cheerful "good-morning!"

As the landlord has said, the Express agent was a big fellow, but he was a loose-jointed, clumsily-built man, and Blake, who was an expert in such matters was able to speedily "size" him up.

Good arms and chest but no legs; a man who could stand a big strain for a few moments and then would go all to pieces.

Good on a spurt only, no staying powers.

The face of the man impressed the sport unfavorably at the first glance.

The forehead was low, the shifting, gray-blue eyes deep-set and overhung with bristling brows, while the chin and mouth was that of an obstinate, self-opinionative man.

The office was plainly furnished; the big iron safe in the center of the apartment being the

principal article, then there was a desk and a couple of chairs, and in a corner the bed where the agent slept.

The house was well prepared to stand a siege. The door was of double thickness, the windows guarded by heavy shutters, that were almost bullet-proof, and above the bed a Winchester rifle and a doubled-barreled shot-gun were suspended.

The quick eyes of Blake took in all the details of the scene almost before he examined the man.

The agent was seated in an arm-chair, smoking, and reading a newspaper, when the sport entered.

He nodded in a rather surly way in reply to the sharp's salutation.

"Pleasant morning," said Blake with extra civility.

"Yes, I reckon so," responded the other, surveying the sport from head to foot in what the sharp thought was a rather impudent way.

As the reader who has followed the fortunes of the Fresh of 'Frisco knows, he was any thing but a patient man, and never yet on this earth walked a human quicker to resent an affront than he, but he was also wily and cautious; a man who could tamely brook an insult if it was his game to do so, but who never forgot, or neglected to require an ample reparation for it when the proper time came.

He did not think that it was his cue yet to quarrel, and so he affected not to notice the offensive manner of the Express agent.

"This is the Express Office?" Blake asked, taking extra pains to be polite.

"I reckon it is."

"And you are the agent, I presume?"

"I reckon so."

"Mr. Johnson?"

"That is my name."

"I came in for the purpose of getting a little information."

"About what?" inquired the agent in a decidedly offensive, blunt, off-hand manner.

"Sending money by Express."

"Why, you haven't got any money to send!" Johnson declared in a very contemptuous way.

There was a peculiar glitter in the eyes of the sport, and it was only by a strong exercise of his will-power that he was able to resist the impulse to tell the Express agent what he thought of him, but it was not his game to quarrel at present if he could avoid it.

"Well, I did not say that I had, but that doesn't prevent me from inquiring about the matter, does it?" the sport remarked in a quiet way.

"I don't see any need of your bothering me about the thing," the other observed.

"No harm in asking a civil question is there?"

"Better wait until you get some money to send, then fire away with your questions."

"Then you don't want to give me any information?"

"No, I have no time to waste," the Express agent replied, shortly, and began to read his newspaper again.

"Oh, come now! this isn't the sort of way to treat a man, you know!" the sport exclaimed, his temper beginning to rise.

"You mustn't put on any airs with me, for I am not the kind of man to stand it!"

The Express agent threw down his newspaper, rose and glared at the sport.

"Look a-here, I don't want to have any talk with you—I want you to git as soon as your legs will let you!" he exclaimed, angrily.

"I know all about you, and you needn't think you can come in hyer and try any bulldozing games, for it will not work!"

"My dear pard, it strikes me that you are the man who is trying the bulldozing," the sharp retorted.

"I came in here and asked for a little information in the quietest and mildest manner possible, and I had no idea of rendering myself offensive. When you declined to give me any information, and declined too in a curt and decidedly offensive manner, I ventured to remark that it was not the way to do business, and what I said is perfectly correct too."

"The idea of a man like yourself coming to inquire about sending money!" the Express agent exclaimed. "Why, it is enough to disgust any man!"

"Don't you suppose that I know just how you are fixed?" he continued. "You can't fool anybody in this camp. You came here dead broke, and in rags, and if you had not managed to raise a stake from Flowery Tompkins, I reckon you would have had a pretty hard row to hoe."

"My dear sir, it may be that you are one of the lucky men who have never been under the ban of the goddess, fickle Fortune, who is a capricious jade, like the majority of her sex, but for all that it is a rather unhandsome thing to look down upon a man because he is down on his luck."

"This is a world of sudden changes, you know," the sport added. "And the man who is a beggar to-day may be a millionaire to-morrow."

"Never despise a man because he wears a ragged coat. There is a good deal in that saying, you know, although it does sound like a lit-



the cheap talk—taffy, such as the wily politicians give the workmen just about election time.”

“Oh, I understand your game—you can’t fool me!” the other declared. “You talked smoothly enough in the beginning, but when you found that I wasn’t inclined to bother with you, you was disposed to cut up rusty.”

“I want you to understand, though, that I am the boss of this office, and if I ain’t disposed to give you any information, there isn’t anybody in this hyer town who can make me do it.”

“I did not insinuate that there was, did I?” the sharp exclaimed, a little tartly.

He was beginning to lose patience. Above all things he hated a bull-headed man who would not listen to reason.

“You had better vamose the ranch, now, just as quickly as you can!” Johnson declared. “I know you are up to some game, for you have not got any money to send, and what is more, you are not likely to have any. And you needn’t think, either, that you can come in here and scare me on account of having had a skirmish with some drunken men, and managed to get the best of them because they were so full of bug-juice that they were not able to fight.”

“Ah, that is the way you heard the story, eh?” the Fresh remarked.

The statement did not surprise him, for he had been informed that morning by one of the gossips of the village that the men whom he had defeated, and their friends, were trying to belittle his victory by declaring that the three beaten men were so much under the influence of liquor that they were not fit to go into a contest.

“Yes, and I know that it is the truth too, for no such man as you are would be able to get away with Big Ben, to say nothing of the other two.”

“Well, it may be so,” Blake responded, in his quiet way. “I don’t know much about the fellows, so it is possible that I couldn’t tell whether they were sober or drunk; but, sport, if you want to risk a stake I will bet you good money that you can’t get either one of the three to take another hack at me in a fair fight.”

“Understand! this is no boast, you know, but merely a business proposition on my part.”

“Oh, I reckon that if I offer to put up any money you would try to crawl out of the bet in some way!” the Express agent declared, in a contemptuous manner.

“Well, I will admit that I am not rich enough just now to buy any gold mines, or to start a national bank, but what money I have I will bet to the last dollar, so if you are inclined to give me a show for what money I can put up I am your man!”

“Oh, I don’t want to win what few dollars you have—and I don’t doubt that they are few enough—but I want you to understand I am not going to have you fooling around this hyer office with any ridiculous questions about sending money by Express, for I know mighty well that you will never have much money to send.”

“I didn’t say I wanted to send any money, did I?” the sport demanded.

“No, but I know what you wanted me to think, but I am right onto you, and you can’t play any roots on me!” the Express agent replied, arrogantly.

“Now, pard, you are barking up the wrong tree, for my idea of inquiring about this money Express business was because I thought there might be a chance for me to get a job.”

“A job?”

“Yes, to ride on the hearse and guard the treasure,” the Fresh explained. “I suppose you heard about the trap that this Captain Blood’s band set to catch Flowery Tompkins, and which I got into?”

“You don’t suppose I take any stock in that yarn, do you?” the Express agent exclaimed with a scornful laugh.

The Fresh surveyed the Express agent for a moment, the peculiar glitter in his eyes growing stronger and stronger.

“Oh, you do not believe that I was stopped by road-agents on the trail?”

“No, I don’t! the story is too thin altogether!” the other responded.

“If Captain Blood was after Flowery Tompkins he would never make the mistake of taking a ragged tramp like you were for the rancher.”

“You got that story up just to work some game, and I would be willing to bet a fortune that there hasn’t been a road-agent within fifty-miles of this camp for months!”

The brows of the Fresh contracted, and in his clear eyes there were lurid lights.

When he was talked to in such a manner he lost faith in the old maxim about patience being a virtue, and took more stock in the one which says, “strike when the iron is hot!”

#### CHAPTER XXV.

##### THE FRESH CONVINCES THE EXPRESS AGENT.

THE reader who is acquainted with Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco, knows that he was quick to come to a determination, and quicker still to execute it.

So having made up his mind to “lock horns” with the Express agent for the purpose of convincing him that he did not know as much as he thought he did, the sport at once proceeded to bring matters to a head.

“Do I understand you to say that you are sure I was not captured by Captain Blood’s band?” he inquired, the glint of fire strong in his eyes, and the hard lines about his mouth and eyes deepening.

“Yes, that is just what I said, and I mean every word of it, too!” the Express agent retorted, his anger roused by the thought that a wandering card-sharp should have the audacity to dare to attempt to talk back to a man like himself in his own office.

“Well, if you say that, all I have to say then is that you are the champion liar!” the sport announced in a calm, judicial tone.

“Who—what?” cried Johnson, so utterly amazed by this direct insult that he could hardly believe that his ears had not deceived him.

“Don’t you understand good plain English when you hear it?” the Fresh asked.

“I said that you were the champion liar!”

“You miserable hound! I will have your life!” the Express agent yelled, and then with the fury of an enraged tiger he rushed at the sport, striking some terrific blows at him.

If these strokes had alighted on the sharp’s person they would have damaged him materially beyond a doubt, for Johnson was a powerful man, and being thoroughly wrought up by the insult which the stranger had hurled at him, was doing his best to spoil the looks of the Fresh’s frontispiece.

Of course the sharp was fully prepared for the attack, for he had purposely provoked it, and when the Express agent rushed at him, he retreated before the attack, deftly parrying the vicious blows which the other assailant was showering upon him, and then when he reached the wall, and Johnson came at him, more fiercely than before even, thinking he had got the sport in a tight place from which he would not be able to get out, to the amazement of the attacker the sharp dodged under his arm in so dextrous a manner that he was not able to stop him, thus reaching the center of the office again, and as the Express agent turned to pursue, Blake gave him a right-hand clip under the ear which knocked Johnson, big as he was, over against the wall.

The force of the blow astonished the Express agent, and his first impression was that the stranger sharp had hit him with a piece of metal—something in the “brass knuckles” style, but when he straightened up, preparing for another rush at his man, he was not able to see that the sharp had anything in his hands.

Blake, with his hands up, in an attitude which would have delighted the heart of a boxing-master, was in the center of the room, waiting for the attack.

Another mad rush the Express agent made, striking out vigorously.

As before, the Fresh retreated before the attack, not attempting to return the blows, simply contenting himself with parrying and dodging, and so skillful was he in these difficult maneuvers that Johnson was not able to land a single stroke with sufficient force to do any damage.

The sport understood so well the exact distance that Johnson could reach that he evaded fully one-half of the vicious right-handers aimed at his face by simply throwing back his head as the blow came, the fist of his opponent stopping within an inch of his nose.

The Express agent was a one-handed fighter, a man who made little use of his left arm in striking, merely feinting and guarding with it.

As before, the sharp retreated until he had his back against the wall, and then Johnson, winded by the prodigious exertion he had made, for there isn’t any exercise that will sooner tire a man than striking with all one’s power at the empty air, paused for a moment to catch his breath.

And as he anticipated that the sport would try the same trick of dodging under his arm that he had practiced before, he made ready to catch him at it.

But the Fresh was too good a general to try the same dodge twice.

On the contrary, instead of darting under his opponent’s arm he took advantage of the fact that the Express agent had lowered his guard—Johnson was so exhausted by his attacks that it seemed to him as if his fists weighed about a ton apiece when he tried to keep them up to the level of his chin—a prevalent fault with most amateurs—and out came the Fresh’s right fist with wonderful straightness and force.

The iron-like knuckles landed on the point of the chin, knocking the Express agent backward—and for a moment Johnson felt a sensation as though every tooth in his head was loosened.

Before the stricken man could recover from the shock Blake had closed in with him.

A fierce throb of joy came into the heart of the Express agent as he threw his strong arms around his antagonist.

He felt certain that he was a much stronger man than the sharp, and now that he had Blake fairly within his grasp he felt sure he would be able to inflict terrible punishment upon him.

But in this case the Express agent had most surely “reckoned without the host,” for he was no wrestler, while the sport was a wonderfully good one.

And then too, he was far from being as power-

ful a man as his antagonist, for he was weak from the waist downward, while Blake was as sturdy as a young oak.

Another disadvantage Johnson labored under: he was so winded by the extra exertions he had put forth that he could not avail himself of half the strength which he really possessed.

Under these circumstances it was an easy matter for an experienced wrestler like Blake to get a “crook” on his opponent.

There was a brief struggle—a tug, and down went Johnson flat on his back, the sharp lending his own weight to increase the violence of the fall.

Bang went the Express agent’s head against the hard boards, and for a moment he was half-stunned.

When he recovered the full possession of his senses he found Blake sitting astraddle of him, with his left hand fixed in his necktie, in a way that strongly suggested strangulation, and the right was raised over his face in a decidedly menacing manner.

“Now then, I reckon I have got you about where I want you!” Blake declared.

The Express agent was mad with rage, and he made a vigorous effort to rise, but the sharp speedily checked this movement by tightening his grip on the throat.

“Come, come! none of that, you know!” the sport warned. “I have got you foul, and if you don’t keep quiet I will give you a taste of a little game which will make you think that Judge Lynch has got after you, and you are being strung up to a short tree by means of a long rope!”

“What kind of treatment do you call this?” the Express agent exclaimed; he was so hoarse from rage and fatigue that he could hardly speak.

“Why, you are whipped—don’t you understand?” replied the sport, in a surprised tone.

“This isn’t no way to fight! I am not a rough-and-tumble fighter!” he declared.

“Oh, you object to this sort of business?”

“Yes, let me up and I can whip you yet!” Johnson cried, hoarsely.

“You don’t really think you can do the trick, after the taste you have had of my quality?” the sharp exclaimed, in a tone of wonder.

“Yes, I do!” the Express agent replied, doggedly. “I can hammer you without any trouble, if you will only stand up like a man, and not run all around the room like a monkey!”

“Everything of that kind goes!” the sport retorted. “You are a bigger man than I am—weigh twenty or thirty pounds more—maybe forty, and I am justified in doing a little dodging. The squarest referee in the world wouldn’t accuse me of taking unfair advantage of you in this fight.”

“I don’t care for your referees!” the Express agent cried, angrily. “Let me up! Give me another good, square chance at you, and I will soon show you that I am a better man than you are!”

“Well, I have seen some obstinate men in this world, but, really, I think you are a little ahead of anything in the line that I ever encountered,” the sharp declared in a meditative way.

“Most men would be satisfied after getting laid out as completely and scientifically as you have been that there wasn’t any chance for them.”

“I know better!” Johnson cried, angrily. “I can whip you any day you ever saw, if you will only stand up and fight fair, instead of running all around the room.”

“You are a mighty hard man to satisfy,” Blake replied. “And I don’t believe that your head can be quite right, either, for if you possessed the average amount of sense, you might know that I have not tried to damage you very badly.”

“I could have hit you twenty times where I hit you once, if I had so desired.”

“No such thing!” the Express agent retorted.

“I don’t believe it. You did the very best you could. You don’t dare to give me another chance.”

“Oh, yes, I do,” and with the word the sharp let go of Johnson’s throat and rose to his feet.

The Express agent followed his example.

His face was now almost purple with rage, and his violent exertions had brought the blood to the surface, but his heavy breathing showed that he was far from being in a good condition to renew the contest.

Blake examined him with a critical eye.

“I say, pard, you are not in a fit state for a fight!” he declared. “It is bellows-to-mend with you in the worst kind of way.”

“I will be all right in a moment. You didn’t damage me any,” he declared, fiercely. “When I fell I banged my head against the floor, and that upset me, but I will be all right in a moment, and then you can just look out for trouble, for I give you fair warning that I will warm you in the worst kind of way!”

Blake shook his head.

“It is no use of talking to you!” he remarked. “You have less sense than any man I ever struck. Most fellows have wit enough to know when they meet a man who is too much for them, after they get a taste of his quality, but



you are so willfully blind that I don't believe I can make you comprehend that you are not equal to this job which you have undertaken, until I knock you out in so complete a manner that you will not be able to come up to the scratch."

"Just you stand up to me and quit your monkey business! that's all I ask of you!" the Express agent retorted.

"Oh, I will stand up to you this time!" Blake exclaimed. "But I will go you the biggest lot of money that you ever had in your fist that before I have stood up to you five minutes you will begin to wish I hadn't, obstinate as you are!"

"That is all talk, as I will soon show you!" the Express agent declared, putting up his hands in the regulation manner.

"You will speedily find out whether it is talk or not!" the sport retorted. "You are in for a knock-out, and you can take my word for it that you will not find it agreeable!"

And as soon as he finished the sentence Blake threw himself in position.

The Express agent did not try to rush matters this time. In the first place, he was short of wind, and in the second, he had got the idea that he must be cautious and deliberate.

A moment or two the antagonists sparred, and then Blake "led" for the head, but was short, purposely so, as he wanted to lure his opponent on to an attack.

He was a believer in the old maxim that the hardest blow a fighter can hit is when his antagonist is rushing in on him.

As the sport expected, the Express agent thought he saw an opportunity to get in a blow, so he came onward with a right hand swing.

Blake calculated from the way it was delivered that it would not amount to much, so he allowed Johnson to "land" on his jaw for the sake of getting a "counter," as it is called in pugilistic parlance when a return blow is given almost at the same moment as the first stroke.

As the sport anticipated, Johnson's blow lacked steam, but Blake's right-hander, landing again full on the chin in the same spot as before, made the Express agent's teeth rattle.

Angered by the blow, Johnson made a rush at the sport and swung for his throat this time.

Blake dodged and the blow passed over his shoulder and at the same moment the sport sent in a terrible left-hander which took the Express agent just over the heart—an awful stroke, which made him grunt with pain, and the force of the blow was so great that he reeled backward.

Blake did not attempt to follow up his advantage, but waited, with a grim smile upon his face, for Johnson to recover from the stroke.

It was a moment before Johnson did so, and then, maddened by the chilly smile upon the features of the sport, which seemed to mock his distress, he summoned all his resolution and, drawing in a deep breath, made a desperate advance.

Blake, firm as a rock, "measured" his man as he came in, parried his wildly delivered right-hand swing, and with a return right-hander, which went straight as a die to the mark, steadied his man with a flush hit on the point of the chin again, and then as the Express agent came up "all a-standing," as the sailors say, the sport gave him another left-hand jab, just over the "mark," which completely took the wind out of Johnson.

Over backward he went, coming to the floor all in a heap.

Blake folded his arms and watched his fallen foe for a moment.

"Now if you are not satisfied you certainly are the biggest hog that ever went on two legs!" the sport declared.

It was fully three minutes before the Express agent recovered sufficiently to get up, and then he needed the aid of the wall, and took a chair immediately.

"How do you feel about this matter now, Mr. Johnson?" Blake asked, very politely.

"You are right—you are too much for me," the Express agent replied.

"Then you are satisfied?"

"Yes, you are the best man I ever saw," Johnson declared, so winded that he was hardly able to speak.

"And if you need any man to put on the coach to guard any valuables that you may be sending away you will kindly bear me in mind?"

"Yes, I will. If I need any fighting man I will give you the job."

"Much obliged."

Then Blake departed, leaving Johnson to nurse his bruises.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

BY THE BROOKLET.

THE Fresh strolled away from the Express Office in his easy jaunty manner, and no one to look at the man would have supposed that he had just been engaged in a desperate fight with an antagonist who looked big enough to eat him.

"The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the big, to alter the old saying a little," the sport remarked, communing with himself as he proceeded on his way.

"But though I managed to convince that re-

markably obstinate man that he made a gigantic mistake when he tackled me, yet I cannot boast of having accomplished much.

"True, I enjoyed a little exercise—kept myself from getting rusty, but that was all.

"The little scheme that I had in view of getting the Express agent into a game, so that I might despoil him of his ducats, cannot be worked."

And the sport shook his head mournfully as he made the confession.

"It is a pity, too, for he is one of those obstinate galoots who would have been apt to have panned out well," the Fresh reflected.

"When a man of that kind gets into a game he never wants to stop as long as he has a dollar left.

"Of course, I don't think there is any doubt that we would have wound up the game with a fight, but then I should have been much better satisfied to have thrashed him after I had won his money than have the affair come off as it did."

Then the sport knit his brows in reflection for a few minutes.

"I don't think any one would be justified in saying that I managed the affair badly, too," he soliloquized.

"Of course the game was for me not to fight with him until after I had won his money, but there was no chance to work the thing that way.

"The man was ugly right from the start and I had to hammer him or else retreat like a whipped cur, and that sort of business I do not admire.

"It is a pity the thing happened the way it did," and the sharp shook his head with a regretful air.

"But it could not be helped; a man might as well have tried to talk to a mad bull. Nothing in the world but a sound thrashing, such as he got, could make a fellow of his stamp listen to reason.

"Another strange thing too!" Blake exclaimed as the remembrance came to his mind. "Why was he so positive that I had not been taken prisoner by Captain Blood's gang?"

"Nobody else in the town doubted the truth of my story, and why then should he jump immediately to the conclusion that I was lying about the matter?"

The sport shook his head as though he was greatly puzzled by the circumstance.

"Can it be possible that he is in league with these road-agents, and so is anxious to conceal the fact that they are in this neighborhood?"

By this time Blake had reached the Gem of the West Saloon, and he halted in front of the building while he pondered over the matter for a few minutes.

"Upon my word! it really looks like it!" he exclaimed. "I cannot conceive any other reason, excepting that the man took a dislike to me at first sight, and wishing to make himself as disagreeable as possible immediately cast a doubt upon my statement.

"One thing is certain though," the sport said, abruptly. "And that is, the Express agent is not Captain Blood, or rather he is not the head devil of the gang who came to see me in such a mysterious way, for although the man spoke in a disguised voice yet I am certain it was not this party."

Then the sport looked around him in a thoughtful way.

"What on earth shall I do to pass the time away?" he muttered.

"Of all the dull camps that I was ever in this is certainly the dullest!"

"How would it do for me to visit all the mines in the neighborhood and talk with the men, just as if I had an idea of investing in some property of that sort?"

"I might hear something that would be of service to me—that would aid me in the task that I have undertaken of hunting these scoundrels down."

The sport reflected upon this idea for a while and finally came to the conclusion that he would do it.

"If I don't gain any information it will help me to pass the time away, which I plainly foresee is going to hang extremely heavy on my hands."

So off the sport started, taking the trail, the continuation of the main street, which led up into the foot-hills of the old Sierra Madre Range.

Just as he got fairly out of the town his attention was attracted to a little mountain brook by the roadside, tumbling over a huge rock into a natural basin which the waters had hollowed in a big boulder below.

"It is as clear as crystal!" the sport exclaimed as he halted by the side of the brooklet. "And if I had a cup I wouldn't mind taking a drink."

Then the sport noticed that some fifty feet away there was a little cabin, nestling under the shelter of some big pines.

"I can get a cup there, undoubtedly!" Blake observed, as he started for the house, but before he had taken half a dozen steps the door of the cabin opened and Katherine Anderson appeared with a cup in her hand.

"Did you wish a drink?" she inquired.

"Yes, that was just what I was coming to the house about."

"I saw you stop from the window, and I imagined that the spring had fascinated you, as it does almost everybody who sees it for the first time," the girl remarked, advancing as she spoke, while Blake retraced his footsteps to the brooklet.

He took a hearty draught of the water and praised the virtues of the spring highly.

Meanwhile the girl had been surveying the sport, and when he returned the cup to her with his thanks she said:

"You have changed for the better, Mr. Blake, since our first meeting."

"Yes, thanks to that rancher whose horse I found. He had faith enough in me to lend a little money, but, upon my word, everything is so dull in the town that I don't know when I will ever be able to pay him back; as he told me, though, not to hurry myself or worry about the debt, I am taking it easy.

"He seems to be a whole-souled fellow—you know him, I presume, Flowery Tompkins, as the boys call him."

The girl flushed a little as she replied that she was acquainted with the rancher, and the keen-eyed sport, who could read faces as books are read, immediately came to the conclusion that she had, or did, take a good deal of interest in the man from Agua Fria.

"Very nice fellow, indeed!" Blake declared.

"I suppose you have heard what a narrow escape he had from the road-agents."

"Yes, it was fortunate that he did not take the trail," Katherine remarked.

"I heard all about the affair when I got home. You see, Mr. Blake, this camp is just like a country town, and there are plenty of gossips to carry the news. I have also heard of your adventures," she added with a smile.

"Well, although I must say that the town is dull enough in all conscience, yet things have been pretty lively with me ever since I arrived," he replied with a laugh.

"Yes, I should think so!"

And then the sport wondered what the girl would think if she knew of the "discussion" which he just had with the Express agent.

"I seem to have the luck to get into these little scrapes," he explained. "But as I generally manage to get out of them all right it doesn't matter, I suppose."

And then as a thought came to him he asked: "Your claim is in this neighborhood, I suppose?"

"Yes, just the other side of the house."

"And is your brother there?"

A shade came over the girl's face at the simple question.

"No, he is not," she replied, slowly.

"Not working to-day—taking a holiday, eh?"

"Well, not that exactly; he is away on business—in fact, he has gone to sell the claim!" the girl explained in a sudden outburst.

"Well, what does he want to do that for?" asked Blake, expecting from the girl's manner that there was something odd about the affair.

"Oh, I don't know, Mr. Blake, I don't suppose I ought to talk about the matter, but, somehow, I can't keep quiet for I know there is something wrong!" and the girl took a seat upon a boulder as she spoke, and Blake could plainly see that she had all she could do to keep the tears back.

"Well, of course, it is no business of mine," the sport remarked, also seating himself upon a convenient rock.

"I am a stranger, and I do not pretend to be a particularly respectable member of society, still people who know me best consider me to be a pretty decent sort of a fellow, and at times I have been complimented upon giving good advice."

"Now in this matter, if you feel it would be a relief to you to speak, and you haven't any friend in whom you can confide, go ahead and tell me the story."

"I will advise you to the best of my ability, and I can assure you that whatever confidence you may favor me with will be sacred."

The sport spoke in that peculiar earnest way so natural to him, and which seldom failed to produce a favorable impression upon strangers.

"I don't exactly understand it, but something impels me to confide in you," the girl replied. "It will relieve my mind, I know, even if you are not able to give me any advice."

"It is the most natural thing in the world for the average mortal to want to confide in some one," Blake remarked, in a reflective way.

"Particularly when they are at all worried by any matter," the sport added. "To free the mind is undoubtedly beneficial, and most people always feel a great deal better after they have confided their troubles to some one."

"I must admit, though, that the rule doesn't work that way with me," Blake confessed. "But then I am a sort of an odd fish, anyway; a wandering philosopher, who has got in the habit of keeping his joys and sorrows to himself."

"Yes, I can see that you are very different from the majority of men," the girl observed. "And, do you know, I believe that is the reason why I feel as if I should like to speak to you about the matter."



"Well, one thing is certain, and that is, that no harm can come from your speaking," the sport observed. "And if it is in my power to aid you in any way, by advice or otherwise, I will be glad to do it."

"You did me a favor when I was badly in need of one, and I shall be glad to reciprocate if I can."

"If you remember, I told you that my brother had not done well in mining?" Katherine said.

"Yes, I recollect, and from the fact that you were out on a prospecting trip, I got the idea that your claim was about done for."

"That is the truth," the girl replied. "For the last month my brother has not been able to make over ten or twelve dollars a week."

"That is only a bare living, I should judge," the sport observed. "Of course, I have not been long enough in the camp to be well-informed in regard to the prices of provisions, but if the alcalde charges as much for groceries as he does for dry-goods, a man has got to make good wages in order to be able to live comfortably in this town."

"You see I am posted," Blake explained, "for I bought my harness there, and, really, it seemed as if the very charming young lady who waits on the store was able to guess just about how much money I had, and went in to get all of it."

"You have seen the alcalde's daughter, then?" Katherine questioned, a dark shade gathering upon her handsome face.

And from this fact, coupled with the peculiar tone in which she spoke, the sport got the idea that the girl did not like the dark-eyed beauty.

"Yes, if the young lady in the store is the alcalde's daughter," he replied.

"It is she who is thinking of buying the mine."

"Well, that is rather an odd idea!" Blake declared. "As a rule women do not bother much with mines, and then, too, as the property is not a paying one I don't see the object of her investing in it."

"It is strange."

"Of course she must be aware that the claim is not a valuable one," the sport remarked. "For in a little camp like this it is pretty difficult to conceal the truth in regard to the value of the mines in the district, and from what I have seen of the young lady I should think she was pretty sharp at a bargain."

"Oh, yes, no one ever accused her of being lacking in either sense or sharpness," Katherine remarked with a scornful curl of her full lip.

"I don't know much about your brother," Blake observed, reflectively. "But from what I have seen of him I should not take him to be a particularly keen business man."

"He isn't!" the girl replied. "He is easy and good-natured, and a bad hand at a bargain."

"No danger then of his attempting to get the best of anybody by selling his claim for more than it is worth."

"Oh, no! He hadn't any idea of selling, for the claim was doing so poorly that he did not think any one would care to give anything for it."

"That was a natural conclusion under the circumstances," Blake declared. "A claim that will not pan out over a couple of dollars a day is not worth working. A man could make more money than that by working for somebody else. It is a poor workman who can not make three or four dollars a day in a country like this."

"Yes, that is what my brother has been talking about doing, although he would much rather be his own boss; but it was his thought that he would not be able to get much money for the claim. He tried to sell it some time ago when it first began to play out, but he could not get anybody to make him an offer."

"And now the alcalde's daughter is willing to buy it?"

"Yes, he was up to the store last night, and in talking to Serena—that is her name—happened to say that he would like to sell the claim, and she immediately said she would give him a hundred dollars for it."

"Well, well! that was a liberal offer, I must say!" the sport declared.

"Yes, but she could not pay him all the money down; she would give him twenty-five dollars a week."

"That would compel him to remain here a month, unless he got some party to take the affair off his hands by advancing the money."

"It is not likely that he would be able to make any arrangement of that kind," Katherine observed. "And then, too, my brother has a chance to make three dollars a day here in one of the mines, so he will not go away."

"Well, I should think the outlook a pretty good one."

"Yes, but it seems to me as if all is not right about the matter," Katherine declared, with a troubled face.

"Why is the alcalde's daughter willing to give a hundred dollars for a mine which is not worth fifty?"

"She is no fool, and unless she has some deep purpose in view she most certainly would never do it."

Blake pondered over the matter for a moment before he replied, and then remarked:

"It really looks as if there was a colored gentleman in the wood-pile. As you justly observed, Miss Serena is very far from being a fool, and she would not give a hundred dollars for a claim which would be dear at fifty, without some good reason."

"It may be though that she has taken a fancy to your brother, and wants to help him along; that would be a reasonable explanation."

A scornful look appeared upon Katherine's face.

"Well, it is possible that she would like to make Martin believe that she thinks a great deal of him," she observed, slowly.

"To judge by her action one would think so; if she has fallen in love with your brother, and wants him to reciprocate, it would be natural for her to try to help him all she can."

"One thing is certain, and that is my brother does not care much for her!" Katherine declared. "And if she would let him alone, I do not believe that he ever would care for her; but she is a regular flirt—one of the kind who would like to have all the men in the camp at her feet."

"Yes, I comprehend, and now I think of it, I remember hearing a couple of men in the Gem of the West Saloon speaking of the alcalde's daughter, and they said that this rancher, Flowery Tompkins, was her particular favorite."

The face of the girl flushed immediately, a fact which did not escape the keen eyes of the sport, although he pretended not to notice it, allowing his gaze to wander carelessly up the trail.

"I believe he is one of her admirers—I have heard so, but I do not know anything about the matter of my own knowledge," the girl said, slowly.

The sport remembered that the rancher had acted queerly when the name of the girl was spoken, and the quick-witted sharp at once conjectured that there had once been a love affair between the two, but the rancher had allowed himself to be beguiled into a flirtation with the alcalde's sister, which the other girl naturally resented.

"Well, is your brother aware of the fact?"

"Yes, and he said at the time that she did not care anything for Mr. Tompkins."

"And do you think your brother has an idea that she is scheming to attract his attention?"

"I think so, but my brother is very odd about some things," Katherine explained. "I know that he is not in love with her, but then he is not in love with any one else."

"Ah, yes, I see; and you think there is a chance that if she plays her cards well he would fall a victim, eh?"

"I am really afraid of it," the girl replied, in a very serious way. "Gratitude is akin to love, you know; and then, as he doesn't care for any other girl, he may come to the conclusion that he likes Serena well enough to make her his wife."

"She is a rather handsome girl, somewhat bold, and lacking in the sweet modesty which is the greatest charm of maidenhood," Blake commented. "Still, all men do not think alike in regard to a question of this kind, and what will repel one might attract another."

"There is another point to the matter, too," Katherine remarked, slowly, and from the way she spoke, it was plain she was reluctant to converse about the matter.

"I hate to be obliged to speak of my brother's weaknesses, but under the circumstances I cannot avoid doing so."

"Any confidence that you may intrust to me, I shall regard as sacred," the sport declared.

"My brother has one terrible weakness: he is an inveterate gambler," the girl said in a tone that trembled in spite of her efforts to appear calm.

"Yes, I was aware of the fact. I heard a conversation in regard to the matter in the saloon last night."

"He is an unlucky gambler too for he seldom wins."

"Yes, that is true; he is no player the others say, and so he falls an easy victim."

"If he sells the mine for a hundred dollars then the money will not be apt to do him any good, for he will be almost certain to lose the money about as soon as he gets it," Blake continued.

"That is what I am afraid of, and, too, when the mine is sold we shall lose our home."

"Well, I suppose it will not be a difficult matter for you to rent another cabin, for there seems to be quite a number of empty ones in the camp; a sure sign that the boom is over and the town is on the downward road."

"When Serena offered to buy the claim my brother said he would be glad to sell, only that by the bargain he would deprive me of my home, and she immediately replied that as she hadn't any use for the cabin we were quite welcome to remain here as long as we liked."

"That was a generous offer."

"Yes, but I do not wish to be indebted to her for any favors," Katherine declared, proudly.

"And then too, there is a good reason why I do not feel inclined to accept the offer; I think she has a double motive. She wishes to place my brother under an obligation to her, and also make me feel that I am indebted to her for a favor."

"The idea is that she thinks you may object to a marriage between herself and your brother and if she can contrive to place you under an obligation your consent may be won."

"Yes, that is one reason, and the other is that her brother, the alcalde, wants to find favor in my eyes, and as I do not like him at all I have never encouraged his suit; but if my brother sells the mine and I am indebted to the Vernal for a home, my situation will be a disagreeable one. I do not like Michael Vernal, much to my brother's surprise, for he is a very pleasant gentleman—one of the richest men in this section, and Martin has often told me that he thought I was very foolish not to jump at a chance to get so good a husband."

"I can see from the way in which your brother thinks, both in regard to his own love matters and yours, that he is one of those peculiar men who regard marriage as a sort of a bargain where the money advantage to be gained by the contracting parties is more to be regarded than the question of affection."

"Yes, that is true, but to my thinking the idea is monstrous!" the girl declared with flashing eyes.

"I would not marry a man I did not love if he was ten times a millionaire!"

"You have got the right idea. A woman who marries a man simply because he is rich, really sells herself, and in the majority of cases it does not take her very long to become extremely sick of her bargain."

"That is my opinion too, and I know I can never bring myself to be willing to become Michael Vernal's wife, so you can see that if this bargain is made, and I find myself dependent upon the alcalde's sister for the roof that shelters me I shall be in a very uncomfortable position."

"Oh, yes, I understand just how you feel about the matter," Blake remarked. "And if I were you I would not remain here after the alcalde's daughter buys the place. I should tell your brother that you do not wish to stay here and that he must get you another place."

"I am afraid that he will not," the girl replied with a doubtful shake of the head.

"He is very obstinate and self-willed at times and when I say that I do not want to stay he may declare that I must, for he cannot get me any other place."

"And when he makes such a declaration as that it means that he will not get you other quarters!"

"Yes, that is it."

"Well, it is rather a ticklish thing to interfere in these family matters," the sport remarked. "But as I said in the beginning you favored me when a favor counted, and now I will be glad to help you."

"A little scheme has come into my mind which I think can be worked," Blake continued.

"In the first place you must leave here the moment the transfer is made. You must not become indebted to Miss Serena."

"Yes, but I haven't any place to go, or any money—that is to say, not enough to keep me for any length of time."

"I am calculating upon your being able to get something to do right here in Painted City," the sport observed.

Katherine look surprised, and then she shook her head.

"You do not think that it is likely, eh?" Blake asked.

"No, I do not."

"Well, I am certain that you can get a place so that you can support yourself without any trouble."

The look of surprise upon the face of the girl deepened.

"A few words will explain the matter," the sport continued. "It was just by accident I happened to hear about it, and at the time I had no notion I would take any interest in the affair."

"Of course, you did not know that I wanted a place," the girl remarked.

"Certainly not," the sport responded. "But now that I do know it, I feel satisfied that you can get a situation at the hotel. The old man has been greatly troubled to get somebody to attend to the restaurant—wait upon the guests, and keep a general lookout for things."

The girl nodded.

"He had a man—a fellow who was decidedly more fond of whisky than work, and as the landlord's patience gave out this morning, the man was fired and a boy put in his place, just to keep things going until the old man could find some one upon whom he could depend, as he explained to me, and he said at the time that he wished he could get some nice tidy girl to take charge."

"I have never done anything of that kind," Katherine remarked, slowly. "But I have no doubt I could give satisfaction."

"Oh, I feel sure of it!" Blake exclaimed.



"You will have a good, comfortable home and the old fellow will pay fair wages, so, if you like, I will speak to him about you."

"If you will be so kind," the girl said in a grateful way.

"Or you can go and see him yourself, which will be better," the sport observed. "You can say that you heard he wanted some one, and you need not mention my name, nor allow anyone to know that I put you on the track."

"Perhaps that will be the best course for me to pursue," Katherine remarked.

She understood the thought that was in Blake's mind.

If it became known that the stranger had spoken to the landlord in regard to her, it might give rise to unpleasant comments, and the girl was grateful to the sport for his thoughtfulness.

"Yes, there isn't any doubt that personal application would be the best way to arrange the matter," Blake affirmed. "You will get the place surely enough, and then you will be independent."

And then a sudden idea came to the sport—one of those odd notions for which the Fresh of Frisco was celebrated.

"By the way, I have just got the idea for a little speculation!" Blake declared, abruptly.

"A speculation?" Katherine exclaimed, in surprise.

"Yes; you say that your brother is going to get some money, and that he will be pretty certain to gamble it away?"

"Well, he always has acted in that way," the girl replied, slowly.

"Of course, it is possible that he may change," she added. "But I do not believe it is likely."

"Oh, men do change, and your brother may, but I am going on the idea that he will not."

"Now, this is my notion: If he goes in to gamble after he gets the money, I will get him to play with me, and if he isn't an extra good player, the odds are big I will be able to win, and then I will turn the money over to you."

This offer amazed the girl.

"But I ought not to take it!" she declared. "If you succeed in winning the money, it belongs to you."

"Yes, but I am not playing for myself, but for you," the sport argued, and he pleaded the case so well, that she finally consented to accept the money, with the proviso that she was at liberty to return it to her brother if she saw he was likely to make a good use of it.

"Of course," Blake exclaimed, "I should consider it decidedly impertinent if I attempted to dictate to you how you should dispose of your money," he added as they parted.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### WAITING.

THE Fresh went on his way, feeling very well satisfied with himself.

"There, I flatter myself I have fixed that matter up in pretty good shape," he soliloquized.

"Somehow I have got the notion into my head that this alcalde and his sister are not any better than they ought to be, and if it is their game to get this pretty girl into their power, I have succeeded in blocking it."

"If she takes the place at the restaurant she will be independent, and will not be obliged to ask favors of any one."

"How true the old scriptural saying is about casting bread on the waters," the sport mused.

"The girl was glad to be able to give me a breakfast at a time when it did not seem as if there was the slightest chance that I would be likely to ever have it in my power to do anything for her, and then, hey presto! comes a turn of Fortune's wheel! She is in trouble, and the man she favored is able to help her out."

"One good turn deserves another, and I am glad to be able to pay the little debt of gratitude I owe, and as far as this little gambling business with her brother goes, it will be just amusement for me to relieve him of his spare cash, if I am going to turn it over to somebody who will make use of it for his benefit, for, strange as it may appear, although I am supposed to be a shark of high degree, yet I could never bring myself to win the money of one of these guileless pigeons without feeling as if I was committing a sort of a highway robbery."

"I admit that at times I have been so situated that I had to do it, but it always went against my conscience, and I invariably make it a rule never to win a cent more than I absolutely needed."

"Give me a foeman worthy of my steel—a man who is something of a sharp—who knows what he is about, and I will take great pleasure in convincing him that there are a few things in regard to games of chance in which he is not so well-posted as he might be, but when it comes to fleecing one of these poor innocents out of his acats I would rather be excused."

From these reflections the reader will readily perceive that the Fresh of Frisco was a very odd kind of a card-sharp.

Blake took a long walk up in the foot-hills and returned to the camp by a roundabout way,

stopping to converse with the miners he encountered.

One and all told the same story; hardly a man in the town was making more than fair day's wages, and would be glad to sell out if he could get a chance.

"I must make a raise and get out of this bu'st-ed camp as soon as I can!" the sport declared, as he made his way into the town.

Then to his mind came thoughts of the mysterious visitor who had called himself Captain Blood.

"There is a little bit of work cut of which I might be able to get some amusement," he observed.

"The fellow is coming to-night for his answer, and when he finds that I have decided not to go in with him, the chances are big he will be angry. Maybe he will make some threats; it is likely that he will."

"If he has any sand and backbone, he will be inclined to go for me on account of the thrashing I gave the big galoot—the Captain Blood of the trail."

"If the head demon could get me to do his dirty work for him, I have no doubt he would be willing to overlook that little matter, but when he finds out that Barkis is not willing, the odds are big that he will go in to show me that I made a big mistake when I refused his offer."

"And now, what is my game?"

Blake mused over this question for a few moments, and then, putting his thoughts into words, said:

"The first thing for me to do is to spot the master rascal, and if I can succeed in doing the trick, I can count that I have taken the first trick in the game."

"I don't know how, or why it is, but I have somehow got the impression that this town is not going to be big enough to hold this mysterious scoundrel and Jackson Blake, and so the quicker I proceed to hump myself for the fight, the better."

Acting on this idea the sport, when he reached the saloon, proceeded to his room.

He easily located the crack through which he believed the mysterious communication had come, and then, with a gimlet, which he got from the landlord, bored a couple of holes in the side of the building, a yard or so under the crack.

"Now then, I fancy that by keeping watch through these holes I will be able to see what my gentleman looks like when he comes to interview me to-night," the Fresh remarked, after he completed his task.

As the night promised to be clear, and there was a bright moon, it looked as if this scheme would be likely to succeed.

Slowly the hours passed away.

Night appeared at last, and the miners came trooping into the town.

One man had hit a "pocket" which yielded him over fifty dollars' worth of gold, and he celebrated the event in the usual manner by treating the crowd, and the result was that the Fresh, in his role of bouncer, had to put a couple of fellows into the street, for when the liquor got into their heads they wanted to "run the shebang," as they announced.

But the speedy way in which the sport ran the pair out of the saloon took all the fight out of them, and the prompt action was also a lesson to the rest.

It was plain that the new bouncer was a man who would not stand any nonsense, and the miners comprehended that they had to behave themselves if they wished to remain in the saloon.

There wasn't any more trouble, although the guests did not depart until near midnight, for the lucky find of the successful miner gave the people so much to talk about that they were reluctant to go to bed.

The average miner is a man who firmly believes that he is always on the verge of making a great strike, and the lucky discovery of the "pocket" immediately made every miner in the camp think there was going to be a turn in the tide of affairs, and one and all hoped that Dame Fortune was going to again smile on the "bu'st-ed camp."

Blake was about the only incredulous man in the room.

"One swallow don't make a summer," he observed, with the air of a sage. "And the discovery of a 'pocket' does not prove that there are pockets in the neighborhood. If it was a vein of ore now the case would be different."

But the crowd were not at all disposed to accept this reasoning as correct, and the sport, perceiving that his unbelief was distasteful to the rest, graciously pretended to allow himself to be convinced that Painted City was on the eve of the biggest kind of a boom.

Old Jake was another doubter; after the miners departed, and the saloon was closed, he said to the sport, as they took some ale together as a night-cap:

"You don't believe dot der boys vill strike it pooty rich pooty quick?"

"No, I do not, but when I saw that I was giving offense by expressing such an opinion I made up my mind to keep quiet."

"The boys are having a hard time and if it is

going to comfort them any to believe that a boom is coming it would be a shame to destroy the hope, but I don't take any stock in the thing, all the same."

"Nein! I vas afraid der town vas gone!" the host exclaimed with a melancholy shake of the head.

"This mining is a game of speculation," the Fresh remarked. "And it is a great deal like gambling. A man takes a flyer at that just for the sake of a little amusement—that is the way the most of them put it, you know, but there isn't one man out of a hundred who tells the truth when he makes such an assertion."

"Men gamble because they are anxious to make money without having to work for it—anxious to get something for nothing, you see."

"Dot vas true, every time!"

"They don't intend to get in deep—only a flyer, you know, but after a little money is lost a great desire takes possession of the man to get it back again, and then comes the mad delusion which leads the seekers after an easy road to fortune to ruin."

"The man says, 'I am out so much, and I will keep on playing until I get it back, then I will stop.'"

"Ah, mine gootness, yesh, but he never gets it back!" the old Dutchman exclaimed.

"Exactly; that is the point; you have hit it! In order to get back what he has lost he keeps on playing and the result is he loses more; that is, he gets in deeper and deeper."

"Yesh, yesh, I haf seen it work dot way a hundred times."

"And if men didn't act in that foolish way, gamblers—regular professional gamblers, you know—would starve to death if they were obliged to depend upon gambling for a living."

"Yesh, dot is so, und der miner is like der mans dot tries to beat der gamblers. He sticks to der claim until he is about starved."

"Hoping against hope!" the sport declared. "Each new day he is sure that before the sun goes down he will strike pay dirt rich enough to make him wealthy for life, and so he holds on to his claim while he has a dollar left."

The landlord assented to the truth of this; the pair drank up their ale and then proceeded to retire for the night.

When Blake got into his room, though, he did not go to bed.

The first thing he did was to examine his revolver so as to be sure that it was in working order, then he extinguished his light and moved a box over to where he had bored the holes in the wall.

Seated on the box he waited for the coming of the unknown, peeping through the holes every now and then.

The moon was riding high in the heavens and its rays were so bright that all objects without could be distinguished almost as well as by day.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### BLAKE'S ANSWER.

FOR a good twenty minutes the sharp remained at his post before his eyes were gratified by the sight of any living thing, and he was just beginning to think that he might as well go to bed, when a horseman made his appearance, coming around the corner of the hotel, and riding so closely to the building that the Fresh was not able to get a good view of him.

All he could distinguish was that the horse was dark in color, and the rider wrapped in a cloak which almost completely concealed his person.

The horseman's hair was long, and a deep black in hue, as was also the bushy beard which covered all the lower part of his face.

On his head he wore the broad-brimmed hat, so common to the region, and as it was pulled low down over his brows, so that about all the upper part of his features were hidden, it was almost impossible to make out what the man looked like.

Then, too, Blake had a strong suspicion that the hair and beard were false, assumed merely for the purpose of disguising the man.

"The fellow has got himself up in such a way that it would puzzle any one to tell who he is," the sport muttered. "And though I flatter myself that I am pretty good at that sort of thing yet I must admit that I don't think I can spot this fellow so as to be able to know him again when he is not disguised."

"The horse though I might be able to recognize, for the chances are big that the animal is not disguised in any way."

The rider approached in such a noiseless manner that the sport immediately jumped to the conclusion that the horse's hoofs were muffled.

"A very nicely arranged game," Blake soliloquized. "If he should be discovered he would be able to get out of the way so speedily as to bid defiance to pursuit, for it will not be necessary for him to get off of the horse, as his seat in the saddle will bring his mouth on a level with the crack."

"Are you awake, Blake?" asked the stranger, who was speaking through the crack into the room, just as the sharp anticipated he would do.

"Oh, yes, I am very much awake," Blake responded, immediately.

The sport had his eyes to the holes and



noted that the stranger started when the reply came so promptly, and then, too, he was undoubtedly surprised to discover that the sharp was not in his bunk but waiting his appearance at the crack.

"You have managed to discover how I communicated with you, I see," the horseman remarked in a tone which plainly betrayed that he was not pleased with the circumstance.

"Oh yes; I am rather a curious sort of chap and I don't like to be puzzled, so whenever anything of this kind happens I immediately set to work and solve the mystery as quickly as I can."

"Well, I don't know as it makes any difference," the other remarked in a meditative way.

"None at all, as far as I can see," Blake declared in his brisk, businesslike tone.

"Have you reflected upon my proposal?"

"Oh, yes."

"What do you think?"

"I do not believe we can make a trade."

"Why not?" the stranger demanded. And from the way he spoke it was plain that he did not like the outlook.

"Well, now, it will not take me long to explain the matter," the sport replied.

"In the first place I have always been used to being my own boss, and am decidedly impatient of control. Now, if I understand this matter correctly, you propose to do all the bossing."

"I understand the game and you don't!" the other retorted.

"Oh, yes, that is correct; of course, it is your game, anyway. You got the thing up, and so you ought to understand it."

"You see it would not be possible for you to boss the job."

"That is true enough, and that is why I don't want to go into it," the sport replied in a very polite and agreeable way.

"I am afraid that you are a little inclined to be tricky!" the horseman declared.

"You don't mean it?" Blake exclaimed in the most innocent manner possible.

"Yes, I do!" the stranger retorted in a rather sullen way.

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort!"

"Oh, yes! Now don't you flatter yourself that you can pull the wool over my eyes, for it cannot be done."

"Why, I should not attempt such a thing," the sport replied in his smoothest tone.

"It would not be wise for you to try any game of that kind!" the horseman exclaimed, in a decidedly threatening way.

"I understand, of course," Blake replied, speaking as though he really was awed by the threat.

"It was my idea that I ought to give you a little warning, for I have an idea that you were trying to put up a little game on me."

"How is that?"

"What were you doing at the Express Office to-day?" the horseman demanded, abruptly.

"Oh, I just dropped in to see how the concern was run," Blake replied, not at all flurried by the unexpected question.

"You didn't go there to inform the agent that there was danger of the treasure-coaches being attacked?"

"Nary a time! Besides, you know, I am not so certain that anything of the kind will happen. It is true you suggested that a game of that kind could be worked, but then, you see, as you are a stranger to me I have not as much confidence in your word as I might have if I knew all about you."

"I am an awful suspicious customer, you know, and I don't believe everything I hear," the sharp continued.

"This little scheme that you proposed to me may not be all square and above-board. It may be a trap."

"A trap!" the stranger exclaimed.

"Yes, that is what I said. I am not well acquainted in this camp, and don't know all the ins and outs of it. You may be some friend of one of these men whom I have hammered, and the little game is to get me to agree to join the road-agents, then give the snap away to the town, thus putting me in the deepest kind of a hole."

"Oh, no, there isn't anything of that kind about the affair," the other replied.

"Of course you will say so, and, no doubt, will be quite willing to swear to it; but I am not green enough to believe that you will own right up to the truth, simply because I have made a good guess at it."

"It is all very well for you to talk in this way, but it is my opinion that you don't really take any stock in what you are saying," the horseman declared.

"You know that I mean business, but you don't care to go in with me."

"That is the truth—you can bet all you are worth on that."

"It is all right, of course; it is your privilege to decline, if you don't care to work under my direction."

"Oh, yes; no doubt about that."

"But I want to warn you that you had better be careful how you attempt to interfere with any of my schemes, for I am not the kind of man to stand any nonsense of that sort."

"Ah, yes, I see; you are one of the sudden-

death kind—your touch is cold and clammy—when you put your mark on a man, he departs instant for the happy hunting-grounds, and you don't even give him time to check his baggage."

Although the sport spoke in the most serious way, yet it would have been a blockhead, indeed, who could fail to comprehend that he was poking fun at the unknown.

"You are laughing at me!" the horseman cried, angrily.

"Oh, no; I would be skeered to laugh at any man who goes around with any such handle as Captain Blood hitched onto him!" the sport replied, in a decidedly mocking way.

"You have managed to hold your own pretty well since you came to this camp, but that is because you have only met inferior men, and I don't doubt you have become possessed of the notion that you are one of the greatest fighters in this section."

"Oh, no! When you come to get well acquainted with me, you will find that I am about as modest a fellow in regard to my own abilities as you ever struck," the sport replied.

"Still, I am willing to admit that I generally hold my own, and if I can't do it I take a brick, as an old-time pard of mine used to say."

"From the fact that you visited the Express Office, I have got the idea that you mean to interfere in my schemes, and I give you fair warning that if you do, it will be certain to cost you your life, for I shall strike you down without mercy."

"There is an old saying that I would like to recommend to your attention and that is 'threatened men live long,' and I will further say that if you are reckoning to have any trouble with me you are making the biggest mistake in the world to give it away in advance, for when a man is put on his guard it is twice as hard to get at him."

"If you dare to cross my path I will get at you easily and quickly enough!" the other exclaimed in a savage tone.

"Brag is a good dog but holdfast is a better!" There is another old saying which it will be wise for you to ponder upon," the sport retorted.

"You will find that I am not boasting when I say that if you dare to interfere in any of my schemes your life will not be worth an hour's purchase!" the horseman declared.

"Oh, bosh! save your breath to cool your soup with!" Blake exclaimed, impatiently.

"You have made a big mistake if you think I am the kind of man who can be frightened by words," the sport continued.

"I am merely warning you, that is all. Now, if you rush upon your fate you will have no one to blame but yourself."

"Oh, that is all right!" the Fresh cried. "I am one of the kind of men who glories in paddling his own canoe."

"I don't ask anybody to fight my battles, and though I know this is a durned unlucky camp for every body in it, yet I reckon I will be able to keep my end up."

"If you are wise you will not interfere in my schemes!" the horseman declared in a very significant way.

"Say, pard—mysterious pard! is there any reward offered for you?" the sport said, abruptly.

"Why do you ask?" the stranger questioned.

"Because I would go in for it if there was! I want to make a stake somehow!"

An ejaculation which sounded like a curse came from the stranger and then he rode off.

"I reckon it is going to be war to the death between that party and a man about my size!" the Fresh declared.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### SEEKING THE TRUTH.

THE Fresh retired to his bunk and fell to pondering over the situation.

"It is going to be war to the knife and no mistake," he murmured, putting his thoughts into words, as was customary with him when he was deeply interested in any matter.

"Now that this head devil has discovered that he can't use me for a tool, he is going to do all he can to make the camp too hot to hold me."

Then Blake laughed outright.

"The man is not as smart as he thinks!" the sport declared. "And he is making the biggest kind of a mistake when he threatens me."

"Of course I understand his game; he has come to the conclusion that I am a dangerous man, and thinks that if he threatens me I will not be likely to attempt to trouble him, but that is just where the error comes in."

"If he was a good judge of mankind he would understand that it is not wise to provoke a man like myself. It is the old legend of the rattlesnake, 'don't tread on me!'"

"Were he wise now, when he made the discovery that I was not going in with him, he would have said, 'All right, suit yourself, but if you don't see fit to join me, have the kindness not to bother your head about my affairs and I will not trouble you.'"

"That was his game, but as he is evidently a bull-headed chap he reckoned I could be bluffed;

before he is a month older though I fancy he will see that he is not as well acquainted with me as he might be."

"As I haven't anything else to do I might just as well amuse myself with a little detective business, as to loaf around the town in idleness; besides, there ought to be some money in the thing."

"If this gang has ever robbed the coaches of the Express money the company, most certainly would pay a reward for the death, or capture, of the men who got away with the treasure."

"And now the next point is—have I got to do all the work single-handed, or can I get some assistance in the camp?"

"I will settle that question in the morning by calling upon the alcalde. If he is the right sort of a man I will give him a hint of what I propose to do; if he isn't I must paddle my own canoe."

Having thus settled the matter to his satisfaction the sport turned upon his side and went to sleep.

And he slept the sleep of the good man upon whose mind lies not the weight of a single care.

He was up early in the morning and after he got his breakfast, questioned the Dutchman in a guarded way in regard to the alcalde.

Jake gave a flattering account of the official, declaring him to be the squarest kind of a man, although very sharp at a bargain.

"Pretty well fixed, isn't he?"

"Oh, yesh, he ish worth more as all de rest of der mans in der camp put together!"

"Well, now, he is just the kind of a man I would like to get hold of—rope into a little game, you know!" the sport declared.

The saloon-keeper shook his head.

"Mine fr'en', you cannot work dot game," he replied.

"It will not do any harm to try," Blake responded. "A man never knows what he can do until he tries."

"Dot ish so."

"I will drop in and make a social call, anyway," the Fresh remarked. "It will not do any harm."

"Oh, no, dot ish all right."

So the Fresh set out.

It was only a few steps to the alcalde's store, but while he was traversing the distance some odd thoughts came into the sport's mind.

"It was this alcalde's offer which gave Captain Blood and his gang a chance to get at the rancher, Flowery Tompkins," he murmured.

"And the gang would have undoubtedly got away with the rancher's money too if he had come by the trail."

"Now does this indicate that the alcalde put up the job?"

"Upon my word it looks like it!" the sport declared. "Still, I may be wronging the man by my suspicion. I fancy though that I can make a pretty shrewd guess at the truth after I have talked with my bold alcalde awhile."

When the sharp entered the store he was pleasantly received by the dark-eyed Serena, and in answer to his inquiry for the alcalde she directed him to the apartment in the rear of the store.

Blake entered and found the alcalde enjoying a cigarette, in the true, indolent Mexican fashion.

"You are the alcalde of this camp, I believe?" the sport remarked.

"I am; pray, be seated," Vernal replied in a smooth and courteous way, waving his hand to a chair as he spoke.

"My name is Blake," the Fresh said as he seated himself.

"My dear Mr. Blake, it is not necessary for you to introduce yourself," the alcalde declared with a polite bow. "Although I never had the pleasure of meeting you before yet I recognized you from your description as soon as you entered. The boys have not been idle, you know, in telling what a great man you are," and Vernal laughed as though he considered he had made a witty remark.

"Well, I suppose that in a camp like this the nearest road to fame is to be able to demonstrate that you can handle yourself a little better than the average man."

"Undoubtedly! to be a great chief is a high honor in a town of this kind, and from what you have shown of your powers it seems possible that you are a match for any man in the camp."

"Well, I don't know about that, and really, I am not a fellow who goes about like a raging lion seeking whom he may devour," the sport explained. "I took the position of bouncer in old Jake's saloon because I couldn't help myself—it was all I could get to do."

"You see, I came to this camp under a misapprehension. I thought it was enjoying a boom, and had no idea that it was as dead as Julius Caesar."

"The camp is certainly very dull, but we are all in hopes that it will pick up."

"I really hope so, for there may be a chance for me to strike a little money. If I don't, I never will be able to get away, unless I walk, and I must admit that the trip on foot that I made to this camp was so uncomfortable that



I have no desire to take my departure in that way."

"Yes, yes, I understand, and you had quite a disagreeable adventure too."

"With the road agents?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't know as I have any right to complain," Blake observed, slowly. "They didn't do me any damage, you know. I was not the man they were after, and when they discovered that fact they let me depart."

"It was a very strange circumstance," the alcalde remarked, reflectively. "Some six months ago, this Captain Blood and his gang operated in this neighborhood, but as nothing had been heard of them since that time, it was considered that they had gone off to some other field where the chance for booty was better than here."

"If they had succeeded in their little game and got at the rancher, they would have made a good stake, though."

"Yes, yes, that is true," the other said, slowly. "But, do you know, Mr. Blake, the most of the people in the camp think there is some mistake about the matter—they are not willing to believe that you did meet Captain Blood's gang! I don't mean to offend you, you understand," the alcalde hastened to explain. "I am only repeating what I have been told."

"Yes, I comprehend that, but I am not quick to take offense. I am not at all thin-skinned," the sport replied.

"Of course I have no means of telling whether the Captain Blood I met was the original Jacobs or not," he continued. "All I know is that he called himself Captain Blood, and I can bear witness that he and his men had every appearance of being first-class cut-throats."

"By the way, was there ever any reward offered for the capture or killing of these road-agents?"

The question was an abrupt one, and when the sport put it, he carelessly let his glance range out of the window, as though he was musing upon the subject.

His idea was to prevent the alcalde from thinking that he was keeping watch of his face, but, in reality, from the corner of his eyes, he was noting the countenance of the other.

But the alcalde was a man who had perfect command of the muscles of his face, and if he was surprised by the observation, he did not betray it, excepting that a peculiar glitter appeared in his dark eyes.

"Well, no—I don't think there was any reward offered," the alcalde replied, slowly.

"I think I would have heard of it if there had been one, and at present I cannot recall to mind the circumstance."

"Did the gang get away with the Express treasure once?"

"Yes, but the amount was small, only a few hundred dollars."

"And so the Express people did not make much row about it?"

"No; they got out a hue and cry, and made a long search for the robbers, but were not able to discover any trace of the men who had done the job."

"Do you suppose there is any chance of their going for the stage again?"

"Hardly; the driver is well armed, and whenever any large amount of money is sent, an armed guard goes with it."

"My idea in coming to see you was to find out whether there was any reward offered for the capture of these men or not," Blake explained.

"If there was, I had an idea there might be a chance for me to make a stake."

"Ah, but the danger would be great!" the alcalde exclaimed, with a wise shake of the head.

"Nothing venture, nothing win, you know!" the sport declared.

"That is true, I presume," the other remarked, thoughtfully. "But, to my thinking, the risk would be too great to warrant the venture; that is, I mean for you to undertake such a task single-handed. If you had half a dozen men now to assist you?"

"Oh, yes, that would make the job easier, of course, but unless the reward was a big one there wouldn't be any money in it if the sum had to be divided between six or seven men."

"That is true, but there isn't any reward offered to my knowledge."

"My little game is upset then, worse luck!" the sport declared.

"Of course, I couldn't go to the trouble of hunting these outlaws without there was good big money in it."

"Certainly not!"

"Much obliged!"

And then the sport departed.

## CHAPTER XXX.

### ANOTHER OFFER.

As Blake passed through the store, he encountered Martin Anderson.

The young man was standing by the counter, counting a roll of bills which Serena had evidently given him, for as the sport came out, she pushed a pile of silver coins across the counter with the remark:

"There, that makes the sum."

The Fresh noticed that the young man's face was flushed as though he had been drinking, and there was a triumphant look in Serena's eyes.

"Hello! you have been making a raise, I reckon!" the sport exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, and if you are game for a little poker to-night, I am your man!" Anderson declared.

"Well, I reckon that will suit me. I never refuse a dare of that kind," Blake replied.

"But have you got the ducats to back up your game?" the young man demanded. "I feel that I am going to be a big winner to-night, and it will not be of any use for me to waste my time with you if you are not well heeled."

"Mr. Blake has plenty of money. I can answer for that," the girl exclaimed, before the sport could speak, and at the same time she made a sign to Blake which he understood to imply that he should not deny her statement, and this movement was performed so rapidly that Anderson did not see it.

"That is good!" the young man cried. "That is what I like! I would not give a snap to play with a man unless he has plenty of money to lose."

"Luck has been running against me for a long time now," he continued. "But this little wind-fall"—and he flourished the roll of bills in the air, "makes me think that things are coming my way, and I feel sure that if I play to-night, I will be able to win a good stake."

"Yes, yes; when luck turns, a man is not wise if he does not follow it up as soon as possible," the girl affirmed.

"You can trust me to do that!" Anderson declared.

Then he thrust the money in his buckskin bag.

"I am going home now to take a nap," he continued. "I got in with a gang this morning and drank more whisky than was good for me, so I am going home to sleep it off, for if I am going to have a tussle with you at poker to-night, I need a clear head."

"You want to get yourself in good condition of course," the sport remarked.

"I don't know how good a player you are, but some of the boys have got the idea that you are away up at the top of the heap!"

"Well, I think I play a pretty fair game," Blake replied.

"You will have all you can do to hold your own with me, now I tell you! I am giving you a straight tip on that!" the young man asserted.

"I play a mighty stiff game," he added. "But I have been running in hard luck now for about three months, and if a man can't get any good cards he can't expect to win, no matter how good a player he is."

"Of course not!" chimed in the girl with her sweetest smile.

"You are right there: the best of players cannot win if he cannot get the cards," Blake coincided.

"I will have them to-night though—I feel it in my bones!" the young man announced. "And so, you had better bring all the money you can rake and scrape together, for I feel sure that you will need it!"

"All right! I will come provided for war!" the sport replied.

"You can depend upon having a lively time!" Anderson declared as he took his departure.

"He has been drinking heavily," the girl said, a peculiar light in her dark eyes.

"Yes, so I should judge."

"Perhaps he can sleep it off so he will be in a condition to know what he is about to-night," Serena remarked, thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes, little doubt about that; there will be plenty of time to get all right before night comes."

"You are a good player?"

"Pretty fair—so considered."

"Gambling is really your business?"

"Yes, I am a sport."

"And do you think there is any chance that you cannot win every dollar this young man has, provided he will play long enough?"

"From what I know of him I think he will be an easy victim. And there isn't much danger that he will not play while he has a dollar left after he once commences," Blake declared.

"Men of his stamp, who have so much faith in their own abilities, are never willing to give up as long as they have a dollar left to stake," the sport continued.

"Yes, I think that is true."

"And all this talk that he makes in regard to luck being against him simply means that he is not an expert card-sharp."

"The ill-luck comes from his meeting men who can play cards better than he can."

"Yes, I have heard men say that he is a very poor player, indeed."

"I don't doubt that it is the truth."

"When he challenged you to a game, an idea came into my mind," the girl explained.

"I take a great deal of interest in Mr. Anderson," she continued. "I think he is one of the nicest young men in the camp, and he has a sister, too, who is a splendid girl, just as sweet as she can be, and I really feel sorry when I think of his throwing his money away."

"I knew that you were a professional card-

sharp and I thought that I could go into partnership with you, just the same as in a mining venture. I will find the money, you will find the skill, and we will share equally in the gains."

A look of surprise appeared on the face of the sport, and the girl laughed when she noticed it.

"This proposition of mine astonishes you, I see," she said.

"Well, yes, I must admit that it does, for it is something out of the common run."

"I do not go into it with the idea of making money," she explained. "My reason is altogether different. I know Mr. Anderson so well that I feel quite sure he will go and gamble away this money which I have just paid him as soon as he can, but if I can get a man like yourself to win it under a partnership arrangement with me, I will be able to return to him half of what he loses. I can offer to lend it to him, you know, and he will never suspect that it is his own money."

"Ah, yes, I see," the sport remarked in a reflective way. "Your intention is a good one, but there is a point which I don't think you have taken into calculation."

"What is it?" Serena asked, evidently surprised.

"Suppose that luck goes against me and I lose?"

"Oh, I shall not complain," she replied immediately.

"I am willing to risk that. I don't care if I do lose a hundred or two of dollars so long as Martin gets the money—that is his first name, you know?"

"Yes, I am aware of the fact."

"Well, what do you say?" the girl asked after a short pause, finding that the sport did not seem inclined to speak.

"Upon my word I hardly know what answer to give you," Blake replied.

"I should think that a man like yourself would jump at the chance!" Serena exclaimed, her lip curling in a scornful way.

"Yes, I have no doubt that it appears to you as if I had received an uncommonly good offer, but in my own mind I am not so sure of it."

"Is that possible?" the girl exclaimed in amazement.

"Indeed it is, and in a very few words I can explain. I am a card-sharp, and have been for years. In my business, skill is the main thing, but luck is a mighty important factor too, and it has been my experience that I have never had any luck when a woman had anything to do with the game."

"Oh, this is nothing but a superstition!" Serena exclaimed, contemptuously.

"That is true, but I can assure you I attach a deal of weight to it, and I fancy that ninety-nine card sharps out of a hundred would tell you the same thing if they were willing to admit it," the sport declared.

"Then I suppose you are not willing to go into this speculation?" the girl said, evidently much offended.

"I would rather be excused, for I feel certain that I wouldn't have any luck if I did."

"I have capital enough to back my game, and if luck runs at all even I do not doubt I will be able to relieve Anderson of his wealth."

"As a rule, you see, I don't care much about playing with tenderfeet of the Anderson description," the sport added in a reflective way. "For to win the money of such a man seems to me to be only a little ways removed from stealing it outright."

"Well, I must say that you are the most peculiar gambler that I ever saw!" the girl exclaimed.

"Yes, I suppose I must admit that I am rather an odd sort of a customer," the sharp responded. "It is not often that you find a man in my line who allows sentiment to interfere with business; a gambler with a conscience is an extremely rare bird."

"Yes, I should say so!" the girl declared in a decidedly scornful way.

"Well, I am that *rara avis*! I was born that way, I suppose, and so I cannot help it."

"You decline my proposition, then?"

"Under the circumstances I am obliged to, much as I hate to refuse a lady's request," the sport replied with a gallant bow.

"Oh, that is all right. Of course you are at liberty to decline if you want to do so," Serena remarked, but it was plain from the way she spoke that she was very much annoyed by the circumstance.

"One thing I will ask, though," she added, after a moment's pause, "and that is, that you will not say anything to Martin about this matter, for though I do take an interest in him, yet I don't want him to know it."

"You can rely upon my discretion," Blake responded.

"I shall be obliged if you will keep the matter quiet," the girl acknowledged.

"I am not much of a talker, I assure you," and then, with a bow, the sport departed.

"Well, I think I may safely say that if that girl ever gets a chance to do me an ill turn, she will not hesitate to improve it," Blake murmured to himself, as he walked toward the Gem of the West Saloon.



"I have not a good opinion of either the alcalde or the alcalde's sister," he continued.

"To my thinking they are a pair of treacherous sneaks; people who would not dare to make an open fight against a man whom they hated, but would not lose a chance to strike in secret and in the dark; the sort who never go into a game without being sure that all the advantage is on their side.

"I must keep my eyes open, or else I will get a blow when I least expect it."

By this time Blake had reached the saloon, and as he came up he noticed the rancher, Flowery Tompkins, staring in at the side window.

"Katherine Anderson is in there, I'll bet a hat! and he doesn't know what to make of it!" the sport exclaimed.

#### CHAPTER XXXI.

##### THE SPORT AND THE RANCHER.

It was as Blake conjectured.

Katherine Anderson had made application to the landlord, secured the situation without difficulty, and had entered upon her duties immediately.

The sport approached near enough to see that the rancher was indeed watching the girl, and then he halted to reflect upon the situation.

Tompkins was so occupied in staring at Katherine that he did not notice the approach of the Fresh.

"Let me see now how I had better act in this peculiar situation," the sport mused.

"From what the girl told me, coupled with the interview which I have just had with the alcalde's sister, I think I understand how the land lies," he continued.

"There has been a little love affair between the rancher and Miss Katherine; then the alcalde got his eyes on the girl, and in order to help her brother out, this bold, black-eyed siren set her cap for Tompkins, and he, with the usual lack of sense possessed by the average man, was fool enough to allow himself to be entrapped into a flirtation; the chances are big too that he thinks more of Katherine's little finger than he does of the whole body of the other girl, and if he hadn't been the biggest kind of a donkey he would not have allowed himself to be attracted by her.

"Of course this feminine schemer took care to have it come to the knowledge of Katherine that her lover was dancing attendance on her, and she naturally resented it, thereby producing a coolness between herself and the rancher, which was just what the alcalde's sister wanted.

"It is an old game, which has been worked a myriad of times since the world was young, and owing to the fact that the majority of men are more or less foolish where a pretty woman is concerned, it more often succeeds than fails.

"Now it is evident from the interest this charming schemer takes in Martin Anderson that he is the man she fancies, but in flirting with the rancher she had a double purpose in view: first she made a break between Tompkins and Katherine Anderson, so as to help her brother to win the girl; second, by pretending to encourage the rancher she spurred Martin on to make love to her. It is human nature for one fellow to want to cut another fellow out when there is a pretty woman in the question.

"So far the girl's plans have succeeded to perfection; she did attract the rancher, and got him away from Katherine; Martin has been placed under the weight of obligation, and the first thing he knows he will be ensnared so that he will feel compelled to marry the girl.

"But just at this point I come in!" And then the sport indulged in a quiet laugh, and was full of satisfaction.

"I feel certain that neither the alcalde nor his sister like me; equally certain am I that they would not hesitate to damage me if they could.

"Katherine befriended me at a time when I was in sore need, and all through my life I have always made it a rule to pay my debts whether due to friend or foe.

"Now then, I think I can upset this siren's schemes, and most certainly I ought to try to do so even if I don't succeed. The first move for me to make is to acquaint the rancher with the game that is being played.

"It will be doing him a service, too, and that is in order, for he helped me when I needed aid, and one good turn deserves another."

Having come to this determination the sport addressed the rancher.

"Rather astonished at seeing Miss Katherine in the Gem of the West, eh?" he exclaimed.

Tompkins gave a start and appeared to be confused.

"Well, yes," he said, after a pause, "I am a little surprised."

"The young lady was so situated that she felt as if she ought to make an effort to look out for herself, and hearing that old Jake wanted some one to look after the restaurant she applied for the situation."

"How does it happen that you are acquainted with the particulars?" Tompkins asked, evidently annoyed.

"I am the bouncer of the establishment, you know," the sport explained.

The other nodded assent.

"And when Jake had to get rid of the fellow

who attended to the restaurant I was one of the first to know it. I happened to hear the old Dutchman say that he wished he could get some nice girl to take charge, so when in conversation with Miss Katherine she told me that she was unpleasantly situated and wished she could get something to do, I immediately suggested for her to apply to Jake."

"Seems to me that you take a deal of interest in the matter," the rancher observed, sourly.

"Oh, yes, I do," the sport admitted, frankly.

"And now don't run away with the idea that I have fallen in love with the girl, because I haven't."

"The fact is, you see, I am one of the kind of men who don't go much on women, anyway; the lovely female sex has generally been 'bad medicine' for me, as an Indian brave would say, and so I generally try to steer clear of them."

"I will admit that I take an interest in the young lady, for she gave me a feed once when I was hungry enough to eat almost anything, and I always make it a rule to pay a debt of that sort as soon as I can," the sport continued.

"That is correct, of course," the rancher remarked, his face growing brighter.

"Possibly you don't know just how Miss Katherine is situated, and her reasons for taking a position of this kind?"

"No, I do not," Tompkins replied slowly, and he looked a little ashamed as he spoke.

"Well, if you take any interest in the lady you ought to know all the particulars."

"We used to be very good friends," the rancher observed slowly, and with visible confusion. "But during the last few months a sort of coolness has come—I suppose it is mainly my own fault." And he made the admission with the air of a man who did not like to do it.

"Ah, yes, I see," the Fresh remarked with a nod.

"Well, the way she is situated now, she needs all her friends," the sport continued, and then he proceeded to explain fully the particulars in regard to the girl.

The rancher listened with great interest, and his face grew dark when Blake related how the alcalde's sister had interfered in the matter.

"The little cabin is all there is to Anderson's claim which is worth anything!" Tompkins declared. "And anybody would be a fool to give over twenty-five dollars for the whole business."

"I don't believe that the people who know the alcalde's sister will take her to be lacking in common sense, yet she has given a good deal more than twenty-five dollars for Anderson's claim."

"Ah, but can't you see what the game is?" the rancher asked in an indignant tone.

"Well, yes, it struck me there was a little game in the move!"

"Not a doubt of it!" Tompkins declared in quite an angry way.

"The idea is to deprive the girl of her home—to make her feel that she is indebted to Michael Vernal's sister for the roof which shelters her, and then if the alcalde presses her to marry him, in her desperation, she may be unwise enough to consent."

"I reckon that is the idea," the sport coincided with a wise shake of the head.

"And the alcalde's sister too is weaving such a web around Martin Anderson that before he is aware of the fact he will find himself so entangled that the only thing he can do will be to marry her."

"Yes, you have got that figured out correctly too, I think."

"Well, if Martin can't look out for himself, it is his own fault, but Katherine ought not to be entrapped!" the rancher exclaimed, evidently excited.

"There is a little scheme on foot to make Martin a victim," the sport declared. "I will not mention any name, but a certain party wanted to make an arrangement with me to clean Anderson out. This party would find the money for me to play on, and we were to divide the spoils."

"I can guess who the party is!"

"Well, never mind that; I shall not give it away," the sport affirmed.

"The reason given for this proceeding was that Anderson would be certain to lose his money, and I might as well win it as anybody else."

"That is certainly true."

"And this party further explained that the share of the money which came to the aforesaid party would be loaned back to Anderson when he needed it."

"What devilish cunning!" exclaimed the rancher in hot indignation.

"Say, sport, you are a stranger to me," the rancher continued, "but when I first met you I had faith that you were a pretty good sort of a man, and so I staked you, but if you go into any arrangement of this sort, knowing as you do, that it is all a scheme on the part of the alcalde and his sister to entrap the Andersons, then you are not the man I take you to be."

"Don't you worry," the sport replied. "I declined the offer."

"But I don't hesitate to say that I am going

in to clean out Anderson if I can," Blake declared.

"To my notion there is a heap of sense in the argument that somebody is bound to skin him, and that I might as well have the cash as anybody else."

Tompkins reflected over the matter for a moment, and then he nodded assent.

"Yes, I reckon you are right," he said. "He is just crazy about gambling now, and I suppose you might as well have the money, for somebody will be sure to get it."

"That is the point."

"And the quicker it is gone, too, the better, for then there will not be anything to keep the Andersons in this camp."

"Why, you don't want them to go away, do you?" the sport asked, in surprise.

"Well, I—the fact is, an idea has just come to me," the rancher replied, a little confused. "I need a good man on my place, to take charge when I am away, and Anderson will just fill the bill, and then my mother doesn't like it out here and wants to go East, so, perhaps I could get Katherine to run the household department if her brother was on the ranch."

"Undoubtedly! and it would be a good thing for all three of you."

"You bet!" cried Tompkins, with strong emphasis.

"And now, my dear fellow, you want to go in to clean out Martin as soon as you can, for the quicker he is cleaned out the quicker he will be ready to make a trade with me."

"That is true."

"You need some money to work on—will a hundred do?"

"Plenty."

"Here it is!" and the rancher handed over the cash. "And, mind, I don't ask you to divvy with me. You are welcome to all you can get, and if you do the job so I can get the pair to go with me, I will call the loan square."

"All right! I will do my best!" Blake replied, well-satisfied with the way things had gone.

#### CHAPTER XXXII.

##### THE LITTLE GAME.

THERE was an unusual crowd in the Gem of the West Saloon that night, for the news of the discovery of the "pocket" had spread far and wide, and all the mines in the neighborhood had come into the camp, anxious to learn if any more rich strikes had been made.

All those who had claims in the neighborhood of the successful man had gone to work with unaccustomed vigor, hoping to strike good "pay dirt."

None of them had been successful, though, in the search, yet in spite of that fact there was hardly a man who did not believe that he would soon strike something rich, for as Blake poetically observed when discussing the situation:

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast."

The sport, though, had no idea that any rich deposits of gold would be discovered.

He had seen too many camps of this kind peter out, to use the mining term, to expect that the busted town was going to take on a new lease of life.

But warned by his experience on the previous evening, he did not attempt to discourage the sanguine men; but, like the rest, he talked as though he firmly believed that Painted City was bound to become a great camp.

About nine o'clock Martin Anderson made his appearance, and immediately began to banter Blake to meet him in a poker game.

The sport was agreeable, and a little party was soon formed, and in the rear room, which old Jake had thoughtfully provided for such gamesters, they set to work with the cards.

Anderson was disposed to play a bold game, and as he had considerable money he soon succeeded in scaring off all the players, with the exception of Blake; but as the sport had funds enough to stand the racket, as he remarked, the more recklessly the young man played the better he was pleased.

Anderson was a poor gamester, and though he was lucky enough to hold some very good cards, yet he was never able to profit much by the fact, for he was not skillful in concealing his feelings, and the Fresh, who studied his face as a scholar would study a rare and precious book, had little difficulty in telling when his opponent really had a good hand, and when he was bluffing on a weak one, in the hope of winning a stake by making the other believe he had an invincible hand.

Blake being able to detect whether his antagonist had good cards or not, had a great advantage, and when he was satisfied that Anderson's hand was extra good and his own was not, he refrained from betting heavily, but when his opponent attempted to bluff on a weak hand, and his was a strong one, he went to bet Anderson to a stand-still.

And Blake had a face too, that was as impassible as that of a marble statue; the keenest judge that had ever made a study of the "human face divine" would never have been able to tell from the expression upon the features of the



sport whether he held four aces, a hand upon which a man might risk his life, or a little pair, which a good player would hesitate to back with a five-dollar bill.

So it followed that when Anderson had good hands his gains were light, but when Blake held cards worth something he won largely.

It was the old story, ignorance against skill, the greenhorn against the experienced gambler, and the usual result followed.

At eleven o'clock Anderson was completely cleaned out, and when his last dollar was gone he gazed at his opponent in a dazed sort of way.

Just at that moment Flowery Tompkins came into the room.

The rancher had consulted Blake in regard to the matter, and the sport had suggested that if he made his appearance about eleven o'clock, the chances would be good that Anderson would not have much money left by that time.

The rancher was amazed when he discovered how accurately the sharp had calculated.

"Hello, Tompkins!" exclaimed Anderson with a hollow laugh, "you have just come in time. Don't you want to lend me a hundred or two to throw away?"

"Well, no, Martin, I don't, not to throw away, for that will not do you any good, but I will lend you any sum in reason for any good purpose," the rancher replied.

"Oh, I was only joking, of course," the young man said in a despairing way. "I am a perfect donkey, I know, but I am not fool enough to borrow money from a friend to gamble away."

"But I am through now for good and all!" he added, abruptly.

"I have got my lesson, and I think it will last me all my life; I have thrown away money enough—in fact, I am now practically a beggar, for my mine is sold, and what I am going to turn my hand to in the future is more than I can tell."

"Why, Martin, I can give you a job right off if you want one!" the rancher declared.

A gleam of joy appeared on the haggard face of the young man.

"Is that a fact?" he exclaimed.

"Yes." And then the rancher explained his idea about putting him in as superintendent.

"That would suit me splendidly!" young Anderson exclaimed.

"I am sick of mining—sick of this camp, and would be glad to get out of it."

"You can have the position if you want it."

"Oh, I will take it gladly enough, and I give you my word that you can depend upon me too!" Anderson declared.

"I have no doubt about that," the rancher replied.

"About gambling, I mean," the other explained. "I have got my lesson, as I said, and I am through for good and all."

"You are wise I think in coming to that determination," the rancher observed.

"A little game once in a while for amusement is all very well," Tompkins continued. "But when a man goes in by the wholesale, and is never satisfied until he loses all he has, as you do, why such a fellow ought never to touch a card."

"You are right; I have been the biggest kind of a fool, but I will turn over a new leaf now, and you can depend upon my keeping away from the card table, or, in fact, from any kind of gambling," Anderson asserted.

"You will show yourself to be a man of sense if you live up to that resolution," the rancher remarked.

"It ought to be plain to you by this time that you were never cut out for a gambler," Tompkins added.

"That is so, sure as you are born!" Anderson assented. "I never have any luck."

"It ought to be a warning to you to stop playing," the rancher declared.

"Yes, that is true, and I will not fool away any more money," the young man responded.

"I will be glad to have you on my ranch and I have no doubt you will like the position."

"But, I say, how about sis?" Anderson exclaimed, abruptly. "I would not like to go away and leave her in the camp, although she thinks she will get along all right in the restaurant, here."

"Yes, that is true, I should not care to leave her behind if I were you," Tompkins remarked, thoughtfully.

And then, pretending that the idea had just come to him, he explained about his mother's desire to go East, and suggested that Katherine could take charge of the household department at the ranch.

This seemed to the brother to be an extremely good notion, and he said he had no doubt that his sister would be willing to go, and he further agreed to find out all about the matter in the morning.

Then the rancher insisted upon standing treat, and after a bottle of wine was drunk the party broke up.

"At last I am a couple of hundred ahead of the game!" Blake exclaimed as he proceeded to his room. "And the way is clear for me to escape from this miserable camp!"

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### A WARNING.

THE sport had hardly time to sit down when the landlord made his appearance.

"The Baby Elephant wants to see you," he announced.

"Is he on the war-path?"

"Mine gootness, no!" the old Dutchman replied. "He ish as sober as a judge, und says he wants to have a talk mit you."

"All right—run him in!"

"It looks to me as if dere was something in der wind," the landlord declared in a knowing way.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, my tear fr'en'. He vas very mysterious, und he vas careful to look all around before he asked where you vas, so as to be sure dot nobcdy could hear him."

"That is rather odd."

"Dot ish so; und he says to me, says he, 'Jake, you vas not to give dis snap away,' und I said 'No, you bet me your life!'"

"Trot him in, and I will hear what he has to say for himself."

"Yesh, yesh, I vill do dot in two vags of a jack-rabbit's tail!" the old man declared with a knowing wink, and then he departed.

In a minute or so the sport heard the heavy footfalls of the Baby Elephant in the entry.

The landlord had left the door open so the new-comer found the sport's room without difficulty.

Blake was seated upon the bed when the fellow made his appearance in the doorway.

There he halted and looked around him, then he looked back in the entry, as though to make sure that he had not been followed.

"Are you all alone, sport?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes, there isn't any one here but ourselves."

"And I kin speak without any danger of anybody hearing w'ot I say?" the big fellow demanded, with another careful glance around as though he was doubtful of the fact.

"I reckon so."

"Cos w'ot I have got to say is mighty important, and I don't want to git into no hole, you know," the other asserted.

"Oh, I do not think there is any danger of anybody playing the listener," the sport replied.

"Everybody in the place has gone to sleep with the exception of the landlord and myself."

"Wal, I waited until I reckoned thar wouldn't be anybody nosing 'round," the Baby Elephant remarked as he edged into the room.

"If you speak in a low tone no one will be likely to overhear what you say, even if there is anybody in the neighborhood, but I reckon there isn't."

"That is w'ot I think, but when thar is business in the air a man can't be too keerful, you know," and as he spoke the big fellow closed the door.

Then he took one of the boxes, moved it to the bedside and took a seat, being within arm's length of Blake.

"You are right there for a thousand ducats!" the sharp declared.

"Sport, you are a good man!" the big fellow remarked in an impressive way. I locked horns with you once, and arter the picnic got well under way it did not take me long to discover that I had made the biggest kind of a mistake."

"Well, men will make blunders of that kind sometimes," the sport observed with the air of a philosopher.

"That is a sure enough fact! A man could afford to risk all his ducats on that!"

"Wal, sport, now I am going to give it to you as straight as a string," the big fellow continued in a very solemn way.

"I don't hold nothing ag'in' you, you know, 'cos you made a holy show out of me," he declared.

"You didn't take no unfair advantage, but gi'n me the squarest kind of a deal."

"That is the kind of man I am," Blake responded.

"I was kinder r'iled at the time at the idea of you turning me into a blamed wheelbarrow, but it is all right. It was a free skirmish, anyway, and I s'pose everything ought to go."

"Yes, that is the proper way to look at it."

"I know it, and that is why I ain't a-laying anything up ag'in' you, though most of the boys reckoned that I ought not to be satisfied, and some on 'em said that if they were me they would be hanged if they wouldn't try you ag'in in some way."

"Ah, yes, talk is cheap, but it takes money to buy land," Blake remarked in a sarcastic way.

"That is jest w'ot I told 'em!"

"The chances are a about a hundred to one that the men who suggested such a course to you would never dare to try it on themselves."

"That is the pint! Some of 'em reckoned I ought not to be satisfied, but you kin bet all you are worth that none of them were anxious to try you on."

"Yes, these wise advisers who are so free with their words are usually always very backward in coming forward."

"Of course it is natural for a man to feel sore arter he has his comb cut," the big fellow remarked. "And I s'pose it ain't any wonder that 'bout two-thirds of the galoots in the town reckoned that I would lay awake at night a-calculatin' how I could git squar' with you, but I ain't that kind of a rooster! You upset my apple-cart in a fair fight and I am satisfied."

"That is the right way to look at the matter."

"Now, the other fellows that you bu'sted, Tom the Tinker and Injun Jim, they have been going all around town sw'aring that they are going to git squar' with you one of these days if it takes a leg!"

"Yes, so I have heard; but there is an old saying, you know, that threatened men live long," the sport responded with a smile, evidently not much disturbed by the report.

"I reckon thar is a heap of truth into it, too!" the Baby Elephant declared.

"Well, I was explaining how the boys thought I ought to feel 'bout this matter, so I could kinder lead up to what I was a-going to say."

Blake nodded.

"Bout an hour ago I was a-talking with a gang outside of Sandy's Canary-bird Saloon, when a cuss come up and said a man wanted to see me down the street."

"He p'inted out whar he was a-standing, and I went down to him. He was in the shadder of a house, and I reckon he was a Mexican, though I couldn't get a good sight at him, 'cos he had his hat pulled down over his eyes, and he wore a beard, which kivered up all the lower part of his face."

"I think I know the party," Blake remarked, the description immediately recalling the mysterious unknown who had opened communication with him in so strange a way.

"Wal, sport, now that I come to think the matter over, I reckon that the big beard and the long black hair the galoot wore were false, and the cuss put 'em on so that I wouldn't know who he was."

"I should not be surprised if that was correct," Blake remarked.

"You kin bet money on it, sport!" the Baby Elephant declared.

"Wal, to make a long story short, the galoot said as how he had heard of the trouble between you and me, and he offered to gi'n me fifty dollars if I would lay in wait for you some night and fill you full of holes, 'cos he let on that he had trouble with you, too, and was jest a-dying to git squar'!"

"The fellow lies!" Blake declared. "I hav'n't had any trouble with any one but Tinker Tom and his pard."

"I will take my oath that this galoot wasn't either Tom or Jim!" the Baby Elephant declared.

"Well, what answer did you make?"

"Oh, I fought shy of the thing—told him that the thing had been sprung on me so sudden like that I r'ally didn't know w'ot to say."

"Yes, I see."

"Then he said that as he wasn't in any hurry I could have a couple of days to think it over, and he would meet me ag'in in the same place and at the same time."

"And you said, all right, I suppose?"

"You bet!" the big fellow responded, with a grin.

"Then he scooted to the back of the house, whar he had a hoss tied, mounted the beast and rode off."

"And you wasn't able to recognize the man?"

"Nary time! but I think I spotted the hoss!"

"Aha! and does that give you a clew?" Blake asked, very much interested.

"You kin bet high it does!" the Baby Elephant responded.

"I must say that this is now getting decidedly interesting!" the sport declared, rubbing his hands briskly together.

"If you recognized the horse, that circumstance ought to be pretty suggestive in regard to the rider."

"Wal, I don't know 'bout that," the big fellow responded, with a doubtful shake of the head.

"I have got a line on the animile, pretty sart'in, but I ain't so sure in regard to the man."

"Whose horse was it?"

"Belongs to the Express company."

Blake gave a low whistle, which was a sign that he was profoundly astonished.

"One of the Express horses, eh?"

"Sure as you are born!" the Baby Elephant declared. "I know the beast and am sart'in that thar ain't no mistake 'bout the matter."

"But the rider was not Wash Johnson, the Express agent?" Blake said, in a questioning tone.

"Nary time! He wasn't as big a man as Wash. That is, he wasn't so stout, although I reckon he was 'bout as tall."

"No, I am satisfied that it was not the Express agent. I have met this man whom you have described, and I am certain that he is not Johnson."

"That is my say-so too," the Baby Elephant declared.

"Well, I am much obliged for your friendly



warning, and I will try to return the favor some time."

"Oh, that is all right, sport!" the big fellow exclaimed, rising.

"I always reckon to do the squar' thing as near as I know how, and it would go ag'in' my grain to see so good a man as you are salivated in the back by some pesky galoot who wouldn't have the sand to stand up ag'in' you, nohow!"

And with this declaration the Baby Elephant took his departure.

Blake fell to musing over the circumstances.

"Is it some tool of the Express agent's?" he mused.

"No, no!" he continued after a moment's reflection. "The man who accosted me was no agent, but the principal, and if I can't soon spot him it will be a wonder!"

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

##### THE MESSAGE.

BLAKE deliberated upon the matter and formed a plan of action before he slept.

In the morning he would saunter over to the Express Office and take a look at the stock, for he felt certain he could identify the horse which the mysterious stranger had ridden, if he was lucky enough to catch sight of the beast.

The sport rose early in the morning—it did not seem to make much difference to him what time he got to bed, for he always got up at about the same hour—and after getting his breakfast started upon his quest.

At the door of the saloon he encountered the landlord.

"How you vas dis morning?" the old Dutchman queried.

"First rate! how are you?"

"I vas fine! Say, mine fr'en', dere vas a mans here mit a message for you."

"Yes?"

"It vas Jimmy Stone who drives mit der stage-coach all der while. Mister Johnson, der Express agent, would like to see you."

This struck Blake as being a rather odd coincidence. Here he had started for the Express Office to be met by a message that the agent desired to see him, but he did not say anything about the matter to the old Dutchman, for the sport was a man who believed in keeping his own counsel.

"All right; I will go over and see what he wants," and then the sport departed.

He found the Express agent busy with his books, but Johnson laid aside his work and greeted the sport in a very friendly manner, a fact which excited Blake's suspicion.

"Come, come! what does this mean? He is too friendly by half!" was the thought which immediately came to the sport.

"You said that you wanted a chance to go with the coach as guard?" Johnson remarked.

"Yes, I thought I would like to make a trip."

"Well, I can fix you out to-morrow. I am going to send a small amount of treasure, and although I don't think there is much danger of anybody attempting to rob the stage, yet I have come to the conclusion that it will not do any harm to prepare to beat such a game if it is attempted."

"That is wise, I think," Blake observed. "To my thinking there is a deal of wisdom in the old saying that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

"Oh, yes, that is the truth undoubtedly, and it is on that idea that I am acting," the Express agent explained.

"I am keeping the matter very quiet," he continued. "Not a soul knows that there will be any treasure sent in the coach except you and myself, and I have formed so good an opinion of you that I am not afraid to trust you with the secret."

"Really, I feel decidedly flattered by the confidence that you repose in me!" the sport declared with a polite bow, but his secret thought was:

"Oh, do you think you are smart enough to pull the wool over my eyes with any cheap taffy of this kind?"

"But sometimes, you know, a secret of this sort will leak out in the most mysterious way," the Express agent observed.

"It would really seem as if the road-agents were able to guess by a sort of instinct which coaches carry the treasure-box and which do not," Johnson continued.

"Yes, I have heard suggestions of that kind made."

"And as long as Captain Blood and his gang are in the neighborhood, I think it wise to take all possible precautions to keep them from getting away with the money."

"It is wise."

"So you can accompany the coach to-morrow. I don't know exactly what the job is worth," the Express agent observed, thoughtfully. "But I reckon we can come to some fair arrangement when you return."

"I take it for granted, you see, that the road-agents are not going to get away with you," Johnson added, smilingly.

"Well, you can depend upon my doing all I can to keep them from wiping me out," Blake remarked in his quiet way.

"How are you off for weapons?"

"I have a good revolver, and I fancy that will be all I will need."

"Oh, yes, that will be sufficient, and I don't really think there is much danger of an attack, still a man can never tell."

"Very true, and it is always wise to be on the safe side."

"You will make the trip to-morrow, then?"

"Oh, yes; you can depend upon me."

"All right! I will give orders to the driver to pass you over and back."

"But, I say: will that be wise?" Blake asked, abruptly.

"What is the objection?"

"Why, the moment you speak to the driver about me, he will be apt to suspect that some little game is on foot."

"Yes, that is true."

"Can't we arrange it in a better way?"

"What would you suggest?"

"Suppose you make me out a regular pass, and I will not take the coach when she starts from the camp, but go out of town a couple of miles and board the stage when she comes along; then no one in Painted City will know that I have gone on the trip, and in this way, if Captain Blood has spies in the camp, they will be fooled."

"Yes, that is a good idea, and we will arrange it that way!" Johnson assented.

Then he wrote out the pass and gave it to the sport.

"Now I am fixed, and if Captain Blood and his gang attack the stage, I will try to astonish their weak nerves!" the Fresh declared, as he withdrew.

"A very nice little game," the sport muttered as he sauntered toward the corral.

"And is this man, and the other fellows in the background, fools enough to imagine that they can catch an old sharp like myself in so clumsy a trap?"

And Blake indulged in a derisive laugh.

"Why, the whole thing is as plain as the nose on a man's face."

"The idea is to get me to go on the coach so that the road-agents will be able to put me out of the way with very little trouble; but before they get through with this affair, my gentlemen may make the discovery that they have taken a mighty big contract on their hands."

By this time the sport had reached the corral, and he took a look at the horses.

Sure enough, there was one chestnut-colored beast, which he felt sure was the horse the mysterious unknown had ridden.

"But who was the rider?—not the Express agent!" Blake murmured. "I am certain of that, for he was not as stout a man as Johnson, and then, too, he has a peculiar voice, which it would not be possible for him to disguise."

As these reflections passed through the sport's mind his eyes happened to fall upon the driver, Jimmy Stone, as he was called, a well-built, muscular fellow with a dark and forbidding face.

"That fellow is just about the size," Blake murmured. "But it does not seem hardly possible though that he can be the man; I don't believe that he could ever work such a game; it would be several degrees above him."

"Probably the man was speaking the truth when he said he was the boss, and I think I can make a pretty good guess in regard to the identity of the party too."

Then Blake sauntered back to the hotel, where he encountered Martin Anderson and Flowery Tompkins.

The three took seats in a corner of the saloon, lit their cigars, and had quite a long conversation together; the results which came from that conversation the reader will see anon.

#### CHAPTER XXXV.

##### ON THE ROAD.

PROMPTLY at its appointed time the stage coach started on its eastward trip.

There wasn't any passengers, and Jimmy Stone, as he took up the lines, made the remark that he reckoned he was going to have a pretty lonesome trip.

After he had got over the first two miles of his journey though, just as he reached the top of a little hill, Blake stepped out from behind a cluster of pines, and called out for the stage to halt.

The driver pulled up his steeds.

"I am going with you, pard," said the sport. "I have a pass over the line!" and he held it up so the driver could inspect it.

"That is all right!" the driver exclaimed.

"And I am mighty glad to see you, too."

"I reckoned that the agent was joking when he let on jest as I was starting that he thought it was likely I would pick up some one along the road, but now I see he had this little surprise-party in his mind."

"Oh, yes, he knew I was coming, of course. And I have a couple of friends with me too," Blake responded, and as he spoke, Flowery Tompkins and Martin Anderson stepped out from behind the pine and nodded in the most friendly way possible to the driver, but over his dark features came an ugly scowl as he looked upon the new-comers.

They were armed to the teeth, as the saying

is, a pair of revolvers were belted to their waists, Winchester rifles slung across their back, and Flowery Tompkins carried an extra rifle in his hand, and though the driver was not remarkably quick of comprehension he conjectured this rifle was intended for the sport.

Another fact which the driver did not notice, so annoyed was he by the unexpected appearance of the two, and that was that Anderson was dressed exactly the same as himself: red shirt, butternut colored breeches, and a broad-brimmed brown hat, and as he was about the same size as the driver, any one, at a little distance off, would have been puzzled to tell them apart.

"Wal, I dunno 'bout taking them!" exclaimed the man in a sulky way.

"Why not?" Blake demanded, sharply. "They have the money to pay their fare, and you have got to take them, and that is all there is to it!"

"Don't you know that you are talking mighty darned sassy?" the driver exclaimed.

"Is that so?" Blake replied, mockingly.

"Yes, it is, and I have thumped men clear out of thair boots for a blamed sight less chin music too!" the driver cried, threateningly.

"Just you hop down from your perch and try a little of that on me and see where you will come out!" the sport responded, defiantly.

"Oh, I'm yer man; every time!" the knight of the whip exclaimed, and after making fast the reins to the guard-rail he hopped down to the ground and "squared off" at the Fresh in what he conceived to be an extremely scientific manner.

This was exactly the opportunity that Blake wanted.

He rushed at the driver with the fury of a tiger.

With a feint at the face with his right hand Blake brought both of his opponent's fists up toward off the expected blow, and this afforded him an opportunity to get in the terrible left-hander just under the heart, and he banged the driver as he had never been banged in his life before.

He was a dissipated fellow, decidedly out of condition anyway, and the terrible blow completely demoralized him for the moment.

Taking advantage of his antagonist's confusion, Blake let go with his right, catching the driver under the left ear, knocking him silly. Down he went all in a heap, and when he came to his senses he found himself in the coach, securely bound hand and foot with a stout lariat, and in his mouth was a gag so adjusted that it was not possible for him to talk, and he could only glare with angry eyes at the rancher who sat by his side.

The coach was in motion when he recovered his senses.

Anderson was on the box driving, and owing to his imitation of the coachman's clothes, keen indeed would have been the eyes which could have detected the imposture at a short distance away.

By Anderson's side sat Blake, with his rifle lying across his knees, the hammer raised, ready for action.

#### CHAPTER XXXVI.

##### UNRAVELING THE MYSTERY.

ON for a good five miles the coach went through the silent land without any incident occurring, and then the trail wound over a prairie, heavily dotted with timber islands.

"Now then, look out for squalls," Blake warned. "For if we don't run into a hornets' nest before we get out of this bit of country then I am out in my reckoning."

"Shall I pull up the moment any attempt is made to stop us?" Anderson asked.

"Yes, on the instant. That is the game the regular driver would be certain to play, and we want to fool the gang into the belief that everything is all right until we get them within rifle range, and then this beauty will take care of the business," and the sport tapped the butt of the rifle as he spoke in a caressing manner.

"I fancy that we are going to give this Captain Blood and his gang a little surprise-party which will be apt to make them open their eyes."

"Yes, it will be the biter bit," Anderson remarked.

"Exactly! the engineer hoist by his own petard!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"The man who got up the scheme fancied that he was working the oracle to a queen's taste, and if he is present when the trap is sprung—as I sincerely hope he will be—I venture to predict that a more disgusted man than he has seldom been seen."

"It is not pleasant, you know, to spring a trap for some one else and then get caught in it yourself."

"No, it is decidedly disagreeable," the young man affirmed. "There can not be a doubt in regard to that fact."

Blake's eyes had been busily engaged in scanning the country in the advance.

"If they don't jump on us in the next quarter of a mile I shall be surprised," the sport declared.

"There is plenty of 'cover' ahead, and if the party in charge of the expedition knows a good thing when he sees it he will try to spring



his little trap before we get out of this broken country."

"You will have to be on the lookout that they don't get the first shot," Anderson warned.

"Oh, yes, I understand that. I am pretty quick on the trigger," Blake replied.

"A tolerably fair snap-shot as shots go," the sport continued in a modest way, and no one to hear him speak would have been led to believe that he was one of the best men with a rifle that had ever taken such a weapon in hand.

"The moment the gang puts in an appearance I cannot afford to lose any time," Blake declared. "For to my thinking the chances are big that the fellows will not give me any show at all. It is about a thousand to one, I believe, that an attempt will be made to plug me the moment the coach comes to a stand-still so as to give the gang a chance to take aim."

"I reckon you are right," Anderson observed. "It will be your life against theirs, and the quickest shot will be the best man."

"As a rule I am not a bloodthirsty fellow, and I hate to plug a man so that I know he will be apt to stay plugged," the sport observed in a reflective way.

"Yes, but in this case I don't see how you can well avoid it," the other observed.

"As far as I can see if you don't lay out the man, or men, who threaten to shoot, you will be fixed for planting yourself."

"You are right for a thousand ducats!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"There isn't a doubt that you have described the situation exactly. It is either kill or be killed, and under the circumstances I reckon I shall do my best to drop my man, or men, if there is more than one delegated to wipe me out."

"I consider that you would be perfectly justified in shooting to kill, for you are only defending your own life," Anderson argued.

"That is the point, and no mistake!"

Hardly had the words escaped from the lips of the sport when out into the trail, three hundred yards or so from the coach, came a couple of masked men.

In their hands they brandished rifles, and as soon as they got into the road they leveled the shining tubes directly at the coach.

Anderson pulled up the horses so abruptly that the animals almost sat down upon their haunches, and the coach came to a sudden stop.

Blake was on his feet in an instant; but instead of paying any attention to the men in the foreground, he wheeled around and leveled his rifle toward the rear.

The sport was too experienced a rifle-shot to fear any danger from marksmen who were nearly a thousand feet away, for the shooter must be good indeed who can hit his man in a vital spot at that distance.

Blake was a shrewd calculator, and he had concluded that the men in advance, whose business it was to stop the coach, would not be the marksmen, for the odds were big that they could not do execution at such a distance, but when the coach came to a halt, some man in the rear would step out and shoot him in the back.

The sport was right in this conjecture.

Just as he wheeled around, a masked man, with a rifle, stepped out into the trail a hundred feet in the rear of the vehicle.

The new-comer brought his rifle to the shoulder as soon as possible, but before he could get the weapon in position, the crack of the Fresh's gun sounded on the air, and down went the masked man prone in the dust.

The tragedy was hidden from the view of the men up the trail by the coach, but they anticipated that their comrade had been hurt from the fact that he did not fire, and so, with angry cries, they rushed on to the attack.

Blake leaped nimbly from the stage to the ground, and at the same moment the raucher sprung from the coach, rifle in hand.

The masked men came to a halt, for they were amazed by this disclosure.

"Crack! crack!"

Again the rifle of the sport broke the stillness of the prairie wilderness, the two shots fired so closely together that one sounded like the echo of the other.

By this time the masked men were within five hundred feet of the vehicle, and at such a distance a superb shot like the Fresh of Frisco was sure of his game.

Both men went down, and neither one of them had a chance to fire a shot.

The fight was ended, for all three outlaws were dead.

"Now then, boys, I propose to put these bodies in the hearse, and drive back to the camp without removing their disguises. Let the men of the camp unravel the mystery," Blake said.

This plan was carried out.

Great was the astonishment of the Painted Cityites when the story was told, and eager was their curiosity to see who were the outlaws.

Prodigious was the astonishment when the disguises were removed, and the three turned out to be Michael Vernal, the alcalde of the town, Wash Johnson, the Express agent, and Injun Jim.

The driver broke down and made a full confession.

It was the alcalde who had devised the scheme to levy tribute on the camp, and he, in conjunction with the Express agent, had planned the schemes which had been carried out by others.

Tinker Tom had been the man who had played Captain Blood on the trail, but after his thrashing at Blake's hands he had become alarmed and fled, avowing that it was no use to contend with such a man as the Fresh of Frisco; so the wily schemers were forced to try their luck on the trail.

Our story is told, and but a few more words remain to be said.

Although the dashing Serena protested that she was innocent of all guilty knowledge, yet she concluded it would not be wise to remain in the camp, and so disposed of the store and departed, going no one knew where.

The Andersons went with the rancher, and it did not take Flowery Tompkins long to persuade the pretty Katherine that she would be a great deal better off as the mistress of the ranch than as the housekeeper, and so they were married.

As for the reckless, devil-may-care sport, he lost no time in getting out of the busted camp, very well satisfied to depart in much better condition than when he arrived.

A true type of the Wandering Jew class, he wended his way to the northward, in search of fresh fields and pastures new, as restless in quest of adventure as though it was not possible for him to keep still, and in our next tale we shall tell the story of the Fresh of Frisco in Montana.

THE END.

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